

Divine Fire

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[0:00] Well in me, O blessed Spirit, it's a good prayer to fit with today's sermon, but also this series as a whole.

! Again, kind of a longer passage of Scripture, but I don't think we're going to lose your attention. This is where it happens. They get through the Red Sea. When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said if they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt. So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt, armed for battle.

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.

[1:15] After leaving Succoth, they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day, the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.

And that will be especially the focus of our message today, that pillar of cloud and fire, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Then the Lord said to Moses, tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi-Hirathoth, between Migdal and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Belzaphon.

Pharaoh will think the Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert. So the Israelites did this.

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services.

[2:34] So he had his chariots made ready and took his army with him. He took 600 of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them.

The Lord pardoned the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. The Egyptians, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops, pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi-Hirathoth.

Sorry. I can't say that. Pi-Hirathoth, opposite Belzaphon. As Pharaoh approached the Israelites, looked up, and there were the Egyptians marching after them.

They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out to the desert to die?

Have you done to us? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, leave us alone, let us serve the Egyptians? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert.

[3:54] Moses answered the people, Do not be afraid. Stand firm, and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today, you will never see again.

The Lord will fight for you. You need only to be still. Then the Lord said to Moses, Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.

Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so they will go in after them.

And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his

horsemen. Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them.

The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night, the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side.

[5:07] So neither went near the other all night long. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. And all that night, the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land.

The waters were divided. And the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground with a wall of water right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued them. And all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen fouled them into the sea. And during the last watch of the night, the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion.

And made the wheels come off their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, let's get away from the Israelites. The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.

Then the Lord said to Moses, stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen. Moses stretched out his hand over the sea.

[6:15] And at daybreak, the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it. And the Lord swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen.

The entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground. The wall of water on their right and on their left.

That day, the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. And Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses, his servant.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So it was their darkest hour.

Abraham's descendants, God's chosen people, they were enslaved. Enslaved by Pharaoh.

Pharaoh. And it's interesting. Unlike most other foreign kings in scripture, Pharaoh is not named.

[7:31] It's almost as if he's not human. He's this force, the face of evil and oppression. He treated the people as machines or worse.

Took their babies, robbed them of their spirits, beat their bodies. Things had been good for the Hebrews for a while, for a number of generations, years, while the memory of Joseph was still alive. But memories fade. And the light faded out too for them. They're in Egypt. There was this descent into darkness, a very long, chilling descent, 400 some years.

Lots of darkness. But then there was light. So back in the beginning, God spoke. And there was light.

At this point, here, our God hears. And then there's light. He sends light. And the light shows up first out where only shepherds go.

[8:34] It's seen by a man named Moses. He's out tending his sheep. And he sees this light. He sees this bush burning off in the distance. And he goes out to look at it because it looks so strange.

This bush was burning but not burning up. Apparently, there was some other sort of fuel for the fire, some other cause. And that's confirmed for Moses.

It's confirmed when he gets close and he's overcome by the presence of God and has to hide his face. It's confirmed, too, when he hears a voice from the fire and it turns out to be the voice of God himself.

God tells Moses he's heard. He's heard the cries of his people and he's going to rescue them. It all started off with some fire out where only the shepherds go.

Out in the wilderness, this burning bush. And then that rescue. It happened. There were the plagues. And then the exodus itself.

[9:40] This great march out of slavery. And then almost right away, as soon as they're out from under Pharaoh's nose, there it is again. Fire.

It's one of the first things we're told after they're out of Egypt. Right at the end of chapter 13. It says, they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. And by day, the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way.

And by night, a pillar of fire to give them light so that they could travel by day or night. And neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. So God showed up to Moses in fire. And now God shows up to his people Israel in fire. A pillar of fire and cloud.

All throughout the Bible, actually, we see fire as a sign of the presence of the Lord. Many times God shows up and there's fire.

[10 : 43] Or it might be actually better to say that when God really wants people to know that he's there. That he's with them. He sends fire.

In this case, it was a pillar. During the day, it mostly looked like smoke. A pillar of cloud, smoke. During the night, the pillar glowed.

Red hot. There in the sky. Fire. And that fire, it shone bright. And you could see it from a long ways away. And God used that pillar of fire.

God used it in a number of different ways. And maybe the biggest thing is it served as a constant reassurance for the people. So you couldn't miss it.

Wherever you were in the camp, you could see it. And whenever you looked at it, you were assured, once again, that God was there with you. It was an assurance of God's presence.

[11 : 43] And it was a powerful thing because as a freed slave, they didn't really know where they were going to sleep. Or really where their next meal was going to come from.

Or what was going to become of them. But they did know that their God was with them. That was the powerful message. God was with them and God was leading them.

Through that pillar, God led them. In Deuteronomy 1, it says, The Lord went ahead of you on your journey in fire by night and in cloud by day to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go.

Show you the way you should go. He led them all the way. Psalm 78 says, He guided them with the cloud by day and with light from the fire all night. The Lord is our shepherd and our shepherd Lord. He met them there in the wilderness and he led them along. And I kind of like to think of that pillar of fire as kind of the bottom end of our shepherd God's staff.

[12 : 48] And he enabled the people to see it right there with them. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

And the Israelites, they experience in a very tangible and very real way that comfort from their God. Through that pillar of fire, God also revealed himself.

He spoke. He made himself known. Psalm 99 says, Moses and Aaron were among his priests. Samuel was among those who called on his name. They called on the Lord and he answered them. He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud. And later on, after the Exodus, after Sinai, they got the tabernacle all built, if you know that history.

And that pillar, it was still there, still with them. Exodus 33 says, As Moses went into the tent, this tabernacle, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance while the Lord spoke with Moses.

[13 : 57] From that pillar, this pillar of fire and cloud, God himself revealed himself, his will, his plans. He spoke.

God also sent that pillar of fire just simply to give light, to bring light in the darkness for his people. Psalm 105 says, He spread out a cloud as a covering and fire to give light at night.

It was like this big yard light for the camp that God provided for his people. It was a security light, a night light lit up the camp. It also allowed them to travel at night.

And that was really helpful because that's the ideal, actually, when you're traveling in the desert is to, because of the heat and the blazing sun is to travel at night.

And this light, it allowed them to do that. God allowed his people to do that and provide it very practically for them. And finally, that pillar of fire, it provided security.

[15 : 04] And not just a sense of security, actual security. That pillar, it stood there, kind of like the ultimate security guard there among them.

Manning his post there at the camp. Exodus 14, 19 says, The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, actually stepping in between them and the enemy, the armies of Egypt and Israel.

A few verses later, too, we find God operating from that cloud as kind of the ultimate security guard. During the last night, last watch of the night, the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion.

He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, Let's get away from the Israelites. The Lord is fighting for them. So you got presence.

You got guidance. You got guidance. You got direction, light, protection. All these things. They came through that divine fire and God's presence with them there in the wilderness.

[16 : 14] God took out Pharaoh and he rescued them, brought them through the sea. And then he kept right on with his work, with his people, caring for them, took good care of them, stayed with them, led them each step of the way.

And those weren't the only times either. I can't help but think of other times, too, down through history, down through scripture when God did this.

Examples of divine fire. When the prophet Isaiah was called by God. It was a fiery ordeal. He had this vision of being in the temple and approaching God himself and the throne.

And there was this burning all around and in the room it filled with smoke. And God called out to Isaiah, whom shall I send? And he responded, here am I. Send me.

And then God touched his lips with some of that divine fire, right? And brought a live coal from the altar and touched his lips with divine fire. And then sent him out and led him on.

[17 : 20] That fire, too, it was there in a similar way when God called Ezekiel. Divine fire. Turns out, well, I guess you can think of it this way.

When God fires someone, it's a little different than when your boss fires someone. It's actually quite the opposite. God firing you means you're called and you're enlisted and you're equipped for his service.

You're fired up. For his work. Happened to Moses. Happened to Isaiah. Happened to Ezekiel and others, too. And all of this fire throughout the Old Testament, all this divine fire, it actually led up to what happened one day after Jesus' ascension.

His followers were gathered in an upper room. And it was the strangest thing. Strangest thing happened. Suddenly, it looked like there were flames of fire that came to, to rest and hover over the heads of each of the disciples.

And it was just odd and strange. And yet, if you think about it and you know the background, it wasn't really strange at all.

[18 : 36] That fire being there at that moment, it wasn't really strange at all. Because, you see, ten days earlier, Jesus told them that they would be his witnesses, that it was their role to reflect him on earth, to be his hands and feet and his mouthpiece on earth and carry on his work, that they'd be his witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

They just received this calling from the Lord. And then what happens? The fire shows up to enable them.

Jesus died and rose again to rescue them from their slavery, parted the waters for them, set them free.

And then what happens? It shouldn't really surprise us. Fire. Fire came. Fire. Fire. And that was a huge thing for those disciples. Those tongues of fire on that first Pentecost really were for them like the pillar of fire for Israel there in the wilderness.

For the people of Israel, the exodus, walking out of Egypt, it was an exhilarating thing. Right? The exodus itself was exhilarating. It was an awesome experience.

[19 : 49] But what lay ahead for them, the Red Sea and the vast wilderness and all the unknowns and the enemy armies, it was all very daunting and very, very scary. And it was the same for the disciples at this moment.

Jesus being raised back to life, walking out of that tomb, bringing salvation. It was an exhilarating thing. It was an awesome experience. But what lay ahead of them for these disciples, the big task that Jesus had given them and the resistance they knew that was coming and the persecution and a whole lot of unknowns and how this is all going on, it was very daunting, scary.

So what happens? In both cases, God sends fire, divine fire. And so the disciples, they left that upper room, fired up by God, and got on with life and got started with that work that he had given them to do.

They got going with that reassurance of God's presence, with that guidance from on high, with their Lord protecting them and even fighting for them and bringing light into the darkness on their behalf. They had that pillar of fire with them. For those newly freed slaves in Egypt, God had fire.

[21 : 13] For those newly freed disciples in Jerusalem, God had fire. And the good news is, God's got fire for us today, too. So let's take just another moment and go back to that original pillar of fire out in the wilderness and see what else we can learn.

So in Exodus 14, verses 13 and 14, Moses addresses the people. He speaks to the people, and it's this crucial moment. They're still on the Egypt side of the Red Sea at this point, and they've just found out that the Egyptians are coming, bearing down.

They're being hunted down by Moses and his troops and all those chariots, and they're terrified, and they're desperate. And in their desperation, they lash out at Moses.

It says, verse 10, they cried out to the Lord, and they said to Moses, what have you done bringing us out of Egypt? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die here in the desert. Now, later on, there are other examples when they grumble like this and say things like this. And in those cases, they get chastised. But not here. Not here. They haven't been through the Red Sea yet. They haven't met with God at Sinai yet.

[22 : 29] They've had no chance to really mature yet. And so God, he shows some incredible patience here, and he just sort of graciously meets them in their state of desperation.

He meets them where they're at. And through Moses, he relays his message. Do not be afraid. Stand firm. And you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today.

The Egyptians you see today will you never see again. The Lord will fight for you. You need only to be still. Do not be afraid.

It's the same thing that God said to Hagar when she was out in the wilderness and on the run and fearful for her own life and the life of her son. It's what God would say many years later to a pregnant Virgin Mary in the midst of all her uncertainty and everything she was going through. Do not be afraid. It's often God's opening line. And for good reason. It's meant to reassure his people.

[23 : 33] And that's certainly the intent here, too, in Exodus. His people are caught between a madman's army and a large body of water, and they don't know what to do, and they don't know if they can trust God or trust this fellow Moses.

And so God, he comes to them. He shows up and he says, first off, do not be afraid. And then he says, stand firm.

So they're not to flee and they're not to fight. Stand firm and watch. Watch this. It's a powerful message, right?

No longer are their lives going to be determined by Pharaoh's whims. Now the implication here and the message behind these words is that the Lord is the one calling the shots.

The Lord is set in the agenda, and item number one on the agenda is deliverance. It's deliverance. It looks to the Israelites like they're goners, and it probably felt like they were done for, and they're shaking in their sandals, and Moses tells them to stand firm and watch.

[24 : 47] And then I find it kind of interesting how Moses ends his little speech inspired by the Lord. He reiterates the fact that the Lord will fight for them, and then what does he say? He says, you need only to be still.

And by that, he's not saying, you know, don't move a muscle. He's not saying just go limp, and I'm going to send some angels to swoop in and carry you through the sea and on through the wilderness and into the promised land.

Don't move a muscle. Just be passive. No, that's not it at all. It's a call to trust, to stop their complaining, to stop their panicky chattering, their desperate planning, and be still in the presence of the Lord.

It's the sort of stillness that God talks about and calls us to in Psalm 46, right? Be still and know that I am God.

Be still. And that's God's message to his people during this dark and anxious time. Do not be afraid.

[26 : 00] Stand firm. Watch me. And be still. It's God's message to us, too. So I have a book on my shelf.

It's maybe the book I have with the longest title. It's called, When God Interrupts, Finding New Life Through Unwanted Change. And in the book, it's written by Craig Barnes, a pastor.

He addresses some of the types of darkness that we experience today. And at one point he says this. He says, Every Sunday I look into the pews and see people who have been abandoned by family, abandoned by health, abandoned by fulfillment.

I see successful women who are turning 40 and wondering why they aren't married with children. I see women who have given up their careers to stay home with children and wonder if the world is passing them by.

We have a church filled with men in their 50s who are not happy about what they do for a living.

They can't afford to quit their jobs because they need them to afford a lifestyle they don't really like.

[27:08] In worship every Sunday, there are parents sitting next to kids whom they don't understand but do worry about. Filled with anxiety, these parents, they say and do desperate things that push the kids into an even stonier silence.

For every wedding I perform, there are at least two marriages that are on the rocks in our church.

Every time I baptize a new baby, I always seem to catch the eye of a new widow who is still trying to figure out how she will go on in life without her beloved.

And Pastor Barnes, he goes on like that for a little while and then he goes on to say how most of these people have professed faith in Jesus Christ.

They believe and then he says, but now they have to trust him. They have been abandoned by all other saviors.

Now they have to let the dead bury the dead, put their hands to the plow and not look back. It's kind of like God's message to his people there at the edge of the sea.

[28:21] We get to times in our lives when we have to stand firm and leave Egypt behind and trust him. Trust the one who delivers us.

Like the Israelites, we have the fire of God's presence with us. We have as our father, the one who opened the way through the sea for his people and deliver them.

He fights for us. We have as our brother, our savior, the way, the truth, and the life. And we have the Holy Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit.

That's what those flames on the heads of the disciples represented. God's spirit, God's own spirit with them. today, maybe don't have a literal pillar of fire in the sky.

But we actually have something better than that. We have the spirit of God, God's spirit with us. And the Holy Spirit operates among us today, much like that pillar of fire.

[29:25] Fire did for the Israelites way back when in the wilderness. God's spirit stands among us to reassure and to embolden us and to guide and to protect us.

God speaks to us through this pillar of fire by his spirit leads us. God brings light into our darkness and really true comfort through this spirit that he gives.

And God fires us. He fires us up, too, by giving us his spirit. He gives us a call and then gives us his spirit. God's got a calling on us, so he places his spirit in us.

That pillar of fire, it's still burning. That divine fire, it's burning as strong as ever. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

God, with those slaves in Egypt, we say thank you for delivering us, for parting the waters for us, for standing against the enemy for us, for bringing us safely into your presence through Jesus Christ.

[30:38] We give you thanks. God, with those of you, for helping us, for helping us, for helping us. And we thank you for how you help us now, each day. And mostly, honestly, we don't recognize what your spirit is doing among us.

Don't even realize it. And so it's good to pause, take notice. Through your word, you help form our vision, the eyes of our hearts, to help us to see.

And we pray this morning that you will make us more aware of your presence and the work of your spirit this week. Warm us and shine on us and fire us up and shine your light, Jesus, in the darkness all around.

That's our prayer. In Jesus' name, amen.