



## **SING THROUGH THE FIRE**

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*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, CA, on Sunday, January 8, 2023*

*This is my prayer in the fire  
In weakness or trial or pain  
There is a faith proved of more worth than gold  
So refine me, Lord, through the flame*

*I will bring praise, I will bring praise  
No weapon formed against me will remain  
I will rejoice, I will declare  
God is my victory and He is here*

*All of my life, in every season  
You are still God  
I have a reason to sing  
I have a reason to worship*  
(Desert Song, by Brooke Ligertwood, CCLI #11830)

This is a song about prayer and worship—two constants in a life truly devoted to Jesus. And it is a song about the challenges and heartaches in life—two other constants in everyone’s life.

Prayer is often stimulated/motivated by the context of circumstance, especially difficult circumstance, but prayer is never defined by its context. Motivated, perhaps, but not defined.

Last Sunday, we learned that a desert—dry, hot, barren, lonely (and life is full of such deserts)—can become a House of God, where prayer and praise abound, and bring refreshing and restoration and fruitfulness. The psalmist sang: “[God] changes a wilderness into a pool of water and a dry land into springs of water.” (Psalm 107:35)

Today, we’re thinking about fire. This is an experience that has come home to us in California in the last five years. Our state leads the country by double in the number of wildfires and the number of acres burned, and the rate of destruction increases each year.

California wildfires have changed us. We’re more aware, and more wary.

Fire is one of the most wonderful and valuable discoveries humanity has been given—for warmth, for cooking, for melting, for welding.

But we also recognize that fire is one of the most destructive forces in the world—difficult to contain and more difficult to extinguish (many times we must just let it burn itself out).

In the Scriptures, fire appears in various forms—consuming fire on an altar of worship, fire in a household lamp for light, fire from the sky (lightning) as judgment, and the fire of Hell.

Fire is also a metaphor for the personal trials of life (we sometimes refer to a “trial by fire”), which the songwriter has adopted and described as “weakness or trial or pain.” (We’ll explore this further in a bit.)

God also uses this metaphor in Isaiah (43:2-3): *“When you pass through the waters... When you walk through the fire...”*

Water at flood stage and wildfire are impassable conditions. Impassable. But with God, they are not IMPOSSIBLE!

With respect to flooding, which comes into every life at some point, Jesus said there was something we can do in advance to mitigate the impact of floodwaters.

*“Therefore, everyone who listens to these messages of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, but it did not collapse because its foundation was on the rock.”*  
(Matthew 7:24)

I imagine there is a similar opportunity with respect to life’s wildfires, for God has extended to us this promise: *“When you pass through the waters, I am with you; when you pass through the streams, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not harm you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer.”*  
(Isaiah 43:2-3)

God did NOT promise to prevent floods or fires in our lives. Instead, He promised that when they come, “I am with you.”

If \*I\* made you such a promise, it wouldn’t provide much hope. (“Great! We’ll drown together.”) But ask yourself this: If you *have to* face a fire, would you prefer to do it by yourself or with Almighty God at your side?

I AM is with you! This news was enough to transform a stuttering shepherd named Moses into a bold leader and fearsome deliverer of his nation against all the religious and technological and military might of Egypt.

Exodus 3:13-14 (NET)

<sup>13</sup> *Moses said to God, "If I go to the Israelites and tell them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' – what should I say to them?"*

<sup>14</sup> *God said to Moses, "I AM that I AM." And He said, "You must say this to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

This same I AM is now with you. His other name is Jesus. He is Immanuel (as we sing at Christmas)—God with us. But not JUST with you, like an equally helpless friend—He feels what you're going through, shares it, endures it with you, and is producing something stronger INSIDE of you. He is your Helper, and is *"able to work all things together for good."*(Romans 8:29)

Remember the three Hebrew men who were thrown into a fiery furnace because they refused to worship their king as if he was a god? The fire's fuel was cranked up and they were thrown in, fully dressed and bound with ropes. The soldiers who pushed them in were themselves killed by the fierce flames.

But when the king stood up to look, he saw a FOURTH MAN in the furnace, and all four were free and walking around. He called, and the three emerged, unscathed by the heat or the smoke. The Fourth Man brought them THROUGH the fire victoriously. And the king declared, "No other god can deliver like the God of the Hebrews has! No one may speak against Him." (see Daniel 3:29)

But—we ask, skeptically—if He *is* with us, why doesn't He PREVENT my troubles, or at least eliminate them quickly? Why must I suffer at all?

Is that what you do for your children or those you are charged with caring for—prevent or eliminate everything they find distasteful or difficult?

And if not, why not? Why don't you just shelter and shield them from *all* of life's hardness?

How then would they develop toughness of their own? How would they learn to care for themselves and others? How would they learn to think strategically?

What technology was ever invented that wasn't prompted by the desire to overcome some difficulty?

Strong winds bend great trees, but they also increase the strength of the fiber in their trunks. Enduring the wind makes them stronger and more resilient.

Wildfires burn great forests, but they also clear the undergrowth and over growth, admitting more light and moisture, and add nutrition and mulch for the soil.

Perhaps it's true—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Isn't that just what God promised through Isaiah?

*"The floodwaters will not overwhelm you."*

*"You will not be burned; the flames will not harm you."*

Let's move from general metaphors to specific plain talk. Three of the fires that burn within us are, as the songwriter noted, weakness and trial and pain.

The intense heat that we feel from these three is the uncertainty that they will ever improve. If we ever get a glimpse of a favorable outcome, we can run on the strength of that for some time. But every delay suggests it may *never* change.

I hasten to say, this is, strictly speaking, not a function of the weakness or trial or pain, but of our own short-sightedness. It is difficult for us to see anything beyond what we feel right now—that's how feeling-driven we are, generally.

WHO *can* see the end from the beginning? God can. And if you will trust what He says about the outcome, you will have joy and peace. But if you distrust His words, or put your trust in others instead, it will lead to anxiety and fear. *"It is better to depend on the Lord than to trust people. It is better to depend on the Lord than to trust influential people."* (Psalm 118:8-9)

## **Weakness**

By weakness, I don't mean flabby muscles. Some weaknesses we are born with—they're in our DNA—physiological vulnerabilities or susceptibilities to disabilities or disease or deterioration. Other weaknesses we are bred with—they're environmentally produced—emotional instabilities or hang-ups or bondages, especially fear and intimidation or hostility.

However, "vulnerabilities" do not dictate an outcome, they only describe possibilities. God, the Holy Spirit, can make a way through where there seems to be no way, quenching the fire of weakness. *"Prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick."* (James 5:15)

Instabilities can be strengthened, to a certain degree, on your own, if you have the will to work at it (this is the vast arena of self-help).

In addition, God, the Holy Spirit, who is also called our Strengthener, can even add strength beyond our natural limits and grant abilities that we were not born with and have not learned. And, joined with our faithful obedience, the Spirit can transform childish weakness into mature strength.

*“We desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”* (Hebrews 6:11-12)

## **Trial**

This may be like a courtroom trial—not the Final Judgment, but more like a mock trial, among our peers, to prepare us to be successful on that Final Day.

Such a trial is a test, that usually involves one or more of our weaknesses. This is not a test to evaluate, like an exam in school, but a test to reveal what lies hidden beneath the surface, what is not readily apparent. And from God’s perspective, to forgive, repair, heal, or mature us, with respect to the weakness.

What burns in this particular fire is the humiliation, embarrassment, and shame caused by the exposure of a weakness. But that is not where this story should end.

By putting our faith in Jesus Christ, we’ll find the healing for our grief. When we fall short (as we all do), Christ urges us to repent and return to Him, instead of ducking and hiding. And when we come to Jesus in our hour of trial, He turns humiliation into humility, embarrassment into empathy, and shame into security.

*“God is faithful and reliable. If we confess our sins, He forgives them and cleanses us from everything we’ve done wrong.”* (1 John 1:9)

## **Pain**

Pain burns. It may be a fire in your body, or a fire in your mind. It may be a fire in a relationship. It is intensely hot and relentless.

Dr. Paul Brand and Phillip Yancey co-authored a book with the illuminating title, “Pain: the Gift Nobody Wants.” (If you struggle with persistent or chronic pain, I suggest you read that book. I found it revealing and encouraging.)

For most people, it is almost impossible to ignore pain, whether physical or mental. I find it curiously warped (though I once practiced it), that many religious practices are designed to dull or ignore pain (especially non-Christian meditation techniques, repetitive chanting, sublimation, drug use, and more, but also some practices among Christians). Equally warped are those that urge inflicting pain as a means of overcoming it.

To feel is a gift. God made us sentient beings. Pain can save us from injury and early death. It is a warning signal that something is wrong and needs our attention. Pleasure is the flip side of that coin, and you can hardly have one without the other.

Yet our God is Healer—the Great Physician, and the Counselor. And our pain should drive us straight to Him. For in the end, *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”* (Revelation 21:4)

## **Ministry**

In the present season, we have burning weaknesses, fiery trials, consuming pains, yet God promised that HE will be with us in the fire, and we will not be consumed.

So, how can WE walk with people through the fire? Let compassion move you. Empathize, don't criticize. God has given us tools for responding productively. Do not mind the mess. Just be present, listen, PRAY, PRAISE. Bring the presence of the Holy Spirit into the situation. You have what they need. Introduce suffering people to Jesus. HE's the Expert, so you don't have to be.

*“All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with His comfort through Christ. Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer. We are confident that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in the comfort God gives us.”* (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)

In the final analysis, it is not the outcome, so much as the response that matters. I say that because ALL of these difficulties have an expiration date. They cannot last forever, because they are of this world, and it is already passing away.

But you, child of God, born again follower of Jesus—you have eternal life operating within you. Your body may wear out and perish, but your mind is being renewed, and you will never die. The resurrection life of Jesus is in you now.

That's why we sing of "faith proved of more worth than gold."

*"All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by His great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by His power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see.*

*"So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world." (1 Peter 1:3-7)*

Our faith is likened to gold, in that it must be purified in order to become usable and valuable. Gold ore is melted in a hot furnace, until its impurities have been burned away, and all that remains is the pure element. The smelter knows when purity has been reached, because he can see the clear reflection of his face on the surface of the molten gold. When Jesus looks into your heart, whose image does He see?

Proven faith is faith that *"remains strong through many trials."* Proven faith is pure faith. What is pure faith capable of?

*"Then Jesus told them, 'I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don't doubt, you can do things like this and much more. You can even say to this mountain, "May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea," and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.'"*

Don't be foolish! Some of you have doubted the truthfulness of God's Word, because for 5 seconds you tried to believe and didn't see the answer. That's silly! Pure faith is resilient faith. Pure faith is steady faith. Pure faith trusts in the Giver, regardless of the gift or its delay.

God loves you just as you are, but your faith needs to be refined. His promises are true, but His ways are not yours. Jesus repeatedly called His own hand-picked disciples, "You weak-faith men."

*So, refine me, Lord.* The last line of the second verse invites God to do what He always wants to do—refine us in the fire to purify our faith, to make us mature believers. Rejoice and be glad—God has chosen you to be pure and fruitful. Give Him praise! Bring Him praise! For God is your victory and He is here... with you... in your weakness, in your trial, in your pain.

The devil intends to use fire as a weapon against you. He hopes that you will flee, instead of fight. He wants you to give up. But what the enemy intends for evil, God intends for good. The *weapon of fire* will not prevail. God will use it as a tool to make you better, stronger, more agile, wiser, and more compassionate.

Burning weaknesses, fiery trials, consuming pains. They come to everyone. You cannot escape them. But you can prepare for them. Be fire-wise!

Bring praise. Bring Him praise! He is still God. You have a good reason to sing. You have a great reason to worship.