

## **BAPTISM BY FIRE**

### **LUKE 3:15-22**

One day years ago, I was listening to the radio as I was out driving. I found myself channel surfing. I'm a child of the eighties; my favorite style of music is rock music. So, as I surfed through the stations that I like, I happened upon one of those stations. Their morning programming carried the Rick and Bubba show.

Some of you may know that show, and even enjoy it and if you do that's fine with me. However, Rick and Bubba are not my usual listening fare. I want to be clear that has nothing with their politics; I just don't appreciate their form of humor- it kind of annoys me. So, I reached out my hand to change the channel again, and my hand stopped just short of the knob.

This was shortly after the 2010 season when Auburn won its second national championship. Those of you who know me, know that I am an Auburn fan. The topic for the day was the Cam Newton pay-for-play scandal. Rick and Bubba were going to interview the man who broke the story. So, I was interested in that. So, it appears my loyalty for Auburn knows no bounds. I was prepared to suffer through the Rick and Bubba to get the story.

While listening to the program, the interviewee made the comment that "NFL fans are dedicated, college fans are obsessed." I would agree with that. I don't know if that's true for everyone, but the statement accurately describes me. I understand that kind of excitement because I have lived it. Like many people I was sitting in front of the TV, and I went into orbit when Auburn won the national championship. To this day, ten years later I'm still jealous of Linda Dunivant because she got to go to the game.

I understand the excitement of those games. I've been to the Iron Bowl. I've been to the final game of the World Series and watched Atlanta win it all. The excitement of those events is contagious. When you're in a stadium full of screaming fans it's easy to get swept up in it all.

Now, you may be asking a question about now. What does any of this extended ramble have to do with this story? Well, look at what happens in the story. John the Baptist is down by the river Jordan baptizing people. Some people began asking if he might be the Christ. John somehow learns of this- perhaps, he overheard them or maybe someone told him what they were saying, I don't know- but John somehow learns of this and he answers, "I baptize you with water, but one is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with Fire and the Holy Spirit and fire.

"His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Now, at the end of the passage Jesus was baptized, but in Luke's account of this event makes it anticlimactic, just a couple of verses, almost an afterthought.

Going back to the words of John, I have to wonder what he meant. What does it mean to be baptized by fire? This set me off to thinking about fire. What is the nature of fire? What makes this such a powerful image that one of the greatest evangelists in recorded history made use of it?

Well, consider fire for just a moment. Fire is dynamic. In my youth I spent a lot of time in the outdoors. I have hiked in the Rockies; I have hiked a portion of the Appalachian Trail I have done considerable camping- or I did in my younger years. I have built and tended many a fire in my day. One thing I can tell you is that no two fires are the same. The shape of the flames is different every time. The pattern it creates as it flickers is constantly changing. The ratio between flames and coals is always different. When the fire goes out, the amount of wood consumed is different every time. When the fire goes out, the shape of the burned wood is different each time.

Fire can be dangerous. Left unchecked it can cause enormous destruction. I have served as a firefighter in the past, and I can tell you it can get out of control in a hurry. The only safe fire is the one that's been extinguished, and once started it can be very hard to stop.

Yet, at the same time, fire has a beauty all of its own. If you've ever stared into a fireplace or campfire and watched it burn, you know what I'm talking about. It can be mesmerizing.

Fire is also a very useful tool. Fire can purify. I'm always surprised by the things I learn by being married to a nurse. Before I got married, I assumed that during surgery or other types of procedures, if they struck a blood vessel, they sewed it closed. Nope. They don't. They cauterized it. Fire can kill pathogens that linger in our food or on our cooking surfaces.

Fire can also remove impurities from materials. Did you know that the Greek word for fire is pure? They spell it "pur", they don't have a silent "e", but it's the same word. One of the reasons that blacksmiths work on a hot forge is that the heat of the fire helps to separate the impurities contained in the ore from the metal contained therein.

Fire can be used to mold things. It can melt metals that can then be molded and cooled, making new tools for us to use. It can also mold an entire landscape. Early humans learned to manage land with controlled burns. It can clear a field or a copse of trees, and while it kills off whatever is there, it sets the stage for new growth and new life.

Water can wash away stains, but the object underneath is basically unchanged. Not so with fire. The object burned is permanently changed, and nothing is ever the same again. As I reflect on the nature of fire, all these thoughts occur to me, and I realized these had enormous implications for the statement John made. He will baptize with fire. Could that mean that he will purify us? Could that mean that he will transform us, mold us into something different? Could that mean that we will never be in the same form again afterwards?

I'm reminded of an incident that occurred in the summer of 1998. As a frame of reference, for those of you who know me well, Barbara and I had not yet met at that time- that didn't happen until Christmas of 1998. That summer of 1998 I went to a Christian singles conference in Destin that summer. Confession time- it was a Southern Baptist Conference. Presbyterians didn't have a singles conference or I would have gone to the Presbyterian conference. The conference was well-planned. They had Christian Rock bands. They had Christian comedians. The first night was about three hours, and I marveled. Because I found myself surrounded by people worshipping God and excited to be doing so. It was contagious. I fell to my knees that night, and I raised my hands to the heavens as I sang at the top of my lungs, and tears poured out of my eyes.

I have been other places where I had a similar experiences. I can mention several instances throughout my life. At times I had that experience in Youth Group when I was in Middle School and High School. I had that experience at Camp Maranatha when I was in Middle School. I had that experience at Montreat in High School. I had that experience every time I went to Cursillo, particularly the first time I went. I would come back from those places on fire for Jesus!

But you know what? It never lasted long. I would come back, and in a few days or a few weeks the fire would be gone. I would go back to the routine. Life would return to its humdrum rhythm. It's my impression that many churches are hurting today. There are many reasons for it, but I think one of the big reasons is that the fire is missing. We get a brief taste of the fire in those weekend events, but it doesn't take very long to squelch the flame.

Going back to my opening analogy. The Sunday after Auburn won the national championship, I talked to someone at the church, I think it might have been Natalie Garner, and I made the comment that we were already, last year's national champion. The excitement fades quickly. For those of you who are Alabama fans, tomorrow night you might win the national championship, on Tuesday you will be last year's national champions. The excitement will fade- that's if you win.

Years ago, I heard a quote by the famous basketball coach, Bobby Knight. He said, "I'd rather see a kid with a book than a ball any day. A ball is a moment. A book is a lifetime." Well, if a book is a lifetime, salvation is for eternity. How come we find it so hard to hold onto the fire of the faith? It's easy for us to get excited in the moment. Sustaining the fire is the hard part (keeping the fire going).

Think about our faith for a moment. God loves us. God's crazy about us. God came down here to be with us for years. Did not turn away from us even when he was crucified. God set up the church so that we could be together, loving and serving God, the world, and each other. God told us to spread the good news of his love to the whole world. God told us to expand the circle, bringing everyone inside.

That message ought to fire us up! How come it doesn't? We should be erupting with joy right now. We should be cheering, waving shakers, and giving each other high fives just like they do when a football team wins. How come we're not that excited? We out to be storming the field and tearing down the goal posts. How come we're not? Jesus makes us champions in the cosmos- not for just a single year, but for eternity.

You may not be feeling that right now. If you're not, that's okay. It really isn't your fault. The truth is that the church of Jesus Christ has forgotten how to teach that kind of excitement and how to teach that kind of spirituality and how to inspire them to grow in the faith, becoming disciples. If you feel stuck. If you're having trouble making your miracle happen. If you're not feeling that excitement. If you wonder why you keep coming or listening online week-after- week, I hear you. I have had the same thoughts many times throughout my life.

But I will tell you something else. I want to change all that. I really do. I don't know if I'm going to succeed, but it won't be because I don't try. I want to restore the fire of discipleship to the church of Jesus Christ. I want you to have your Baptism of Fire. I want you to be fired up about following Jesus Christ. I want that for myself too. I pray that through God that we can find it together.