



The Cud...a little something to chew on.

January 31, 1994

The Consuming Love of God

Until the Northridge earthquake a couple of weeks ago, I'd never heard a satisfying argument for wearing pajamas. I thought dressing for bed was redundant. Give me a pair of old boxers, or let me sneak by au natural, just don't make me get dressed up to go to sleep.

But there's nothing like a 6.7 on the Richter scale to alter your fashion sensibility. Let's just say on that particular morning I'm glad I opted for the boxers. Thrown from bed before dawn I found myself outside, shivering in my shorts, with a chimney crashing to the ground in front of me. The chimney missed me, but it didn't miss the sedan parked five yards from my door. With my house uninhabitable and a long walk through the neighborhood inevitable, I was wishing I were a pajamas-kind-of-guy. As it was, I could have been arrested for indecency, or worse, possession of a deadly fireplace. I looked like a reject from an underwear ad, and felt like a candidate for hypothermia.

Clothed and almost in my right mind, I've had some time to reflect on the morning's trauma – beyond the subject of bedroom attire, that is. A heightened sense of vulnerability permeates a community after an earthquake. Physical *and* emotional worlds get shaken. Aftershocks keep you guessing and keep you cognizant of the nearest exit.

Fortunately, the aftershocks subside. But unfortunately, so do the feelings of vulnerability and weakness. I say unfortunately, not because I'm a masochist, but because weakness is our true condition. And vulnerability is inescapable. This side of the grave, no one is shielded from the shaking. Shaking can come from an earthquake, a winter storm, a flood, a fire, or a financial crisis. It's felt in a turbulent marriage, with a rebellious child, an injustice or death. We are all subject to shocks. It's our condition. And when our emotions coincide with the reality of our condition, I think they call that mental health.

But that doesn't prevent us from trying to insulate and isolate ourselves from adversity. We don't like pain. We prefer independence to dependence.

And we spend enormous amounts of time, money and energy insuring against misfortune. So be it. As long as we don't forget what's true.

The writer to the Hebrews observes, "And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.' And this expression, 'Yet once more,' denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:26-29)

It's a simple truth: If it's created, it's shakable. If it's shakable, it's eventually *got to go*. A new kingdom is coming "which cannot be shaken". A kingdom only the ransomed and redeemed children of God will inherit.

According to the passage from Hebrews, our God is the quintessential mover and shaker. I like that. It makes me feel like I have connections in high places. And just think of the parties. But I can do without the "consuming fire" part. That makes me nervous. It makes me feel *vulnerable*. I'd rather have a loving Father than a consuming fire. I believe God is good; why can't He be safe too?

Perhaps love and fire are not mutually exclusive. The Bible is clear that God will not rest until His adopted delinquents are transformed into pure and lovely creatures (Hebrews 12:5-11). But this means God's love must be consumptive. It must consume anything that hinders His loved ones from being perfected in that love. Paraphrasing George MacDonald, it's not that God's fire threatens to burn me *unless* I'm pure; it promises to burn me *until* I'm pure.

Perfect love does not appease. It does not compromise its aim. MacDonald writes: "Nothing is inexorable but love. Love which will yield to prayer is imperfect and impure. Nor is it then the love that yields, but its alloy. For if at the voice of entreaty love conquers displeasure, it is love asserting itself, not love yielding its claims."

Perfect love addresses the good of the beloved, not their whims. Perfect love shakes my world, to prevent my world from shaking me. Love's fire burns me now, so that Judgement's fire won't consume me forever.

I have to confess that much of the time I don't want to be loved. I'd rather be indulged. Not to my credit, I don't want to be purified as much as I want to be satisfied. Or worst of all, there are times I just want to be left alone.

Wanting God to leave me alone is a rejection of His love. Finding that God has left me alone is an indication of His wrath. When Paul describes the current condemnation of the unbelieving world, he does so in terms of God's abandonment, "And God gave them over..." (Romans 1:18-32).

Do you prefer a Father in heaven to the fire from heaven? Well there's no indulgence there either: "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives...All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:5-6, 11).

In the family of God, it's better to feel the stern hand of discipline, then to feel no hand at all.

Preparing for heaven is not preparing for a vacation, it's preparing for glorification. We are not heirs of the Magic Kingdom, we are heirs of the Kingdom of His dear Son. And our God, who is a consuming fire, burns us in order to perfect us. "That the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7).

C.S. Lewis was right: "Our problem is not that we want too much, but that we want too little". And if we want God's love, we're asking for God's consuming fire.

I may not enjoy the shaking, but I know it originates from His loving hands. So bring on the aftershocks.

In the meantime, I'm sleeping in my jeans. I'm just not a pajama kind of a guy.

Shaken, not stirred.

David