

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Consuming Fire

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:23-24

²³ Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. ²⁴ For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

Transcript:

Hello, my name is Scott. I am the senior pastor here. We are so glad that you are with us, thank you so much for joining us in worship today. The Scripture today comes from Deuteronomy chapter 4, and you can follow along on the screens. Moses is speaking to the people of Israel and he says, "But as for you, the Lord took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of His inheritance, as you now are. Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that He made with you. Do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden, for the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." Holy Spirit, I ask that You use these next few minutes to help us understand these words from Scripture and apply them to our lives. We pray this in Your name, Jesus. Amen. Well, we are continuing our sermon series on The Names Of God, because each name in the Bible for God reveals something about His character.

For every opportunity or problem that we have, there is a name of God that speaks to that opportunity or problem. But today's name for God can be a little disturbing. God is a jealous God, that sounds bad. How can that be good? And a consuming fire, which sounds scary, because I'm not sure I want to be consumed. But I think this name is actually key to living a more abundant life because here's the thing, the question is not whether or not we will be consumed with something. We are all consumed with something. School, work, a relationship, success, problems, opportunities, fears, politics. Lots of people are consumed with politics these days, and as a result are afraid and angry because they just spend all their time reading about politics and watching videos about politics. We're consumed with something. You're going to be consumed with something, the question is what is it? Because when we are consumed with the God who comes to us in the person of Jesus, we live a bigger life, we have

more courage and we become renewed people. God is a consuming fire. Fire is an interesting metaphor.

One of the things I geek out on a lot is I love to try to figure out how to build the best fire in my fireplace, how to arrange the wood and paper and all that to get maximum blazing inferno. And a while back I was visiting a friend and we were in his kind of Sunport, it was outside and it was cold so he tried to build a fire in his fireplace and I kept giving him advice. "You need to leave more space between the wood and maybe put it in a crisscross pattern." The whole time, I'm thinking, "Shut up, Scott. Shut up. You're being that guy. Shut up, Scott." I just kept talking, I couldn't help it. Finally, he said, "Don't worry about it, it's okay. Guys can't help critiquing other guys' fire building abilities and their barbecue abilities." It's true, I just have a lot of opinions about fire. I'm fascinated with it. And throughout the Bible, God is associated with fire. When He shows up to give the Ten Commandments, He shows up in fire. A few weeks ago, Pastor John Kim talked about God as the refiner's fire.

And then in today's Scripture as well as in other places in the Bible, God is referred to as a consuming fire. Fire is both constructive and destructive. It can bring heat and light, but it also can burn things to a crisp. Fire is also powerful. We see that in around here, in the forest fires. They can get so powerful, so intense, they can form fire tornadoes. They're so strong. In our culture and in the Bible, fire is also a symbol of passion. Last week was Valentine's Day, did any of you say to your significant other, "I burn for you, baby." Of course not. We're Presbyterian, we burn for nothing. But for other people, fire is a symbol of passion. Or Alicia Keys, "This girl is on fire." So to say that God is a consuming fire means that He is not some emotionless robot with no feelings, He is passionate. That's what it means when it says He is a jealous God. In our culture, jealous implies angry and envious, and all of that. But in the Bible, there's another way to use jealous.

It means not to be angry or envious, but to be passionate about someone or something and fully committed to them. So when it says God is a jealous God, what that means is He's passionate and fully committed to you and to me. And when we reject Him for other things, it hurts Him. He is a consuming fire, and that is both constructive and destructive. Let me talk about the destructive part first. If God is a consuming fire, then what is He burning up? If you're with someone right now, just take a guess, say it out loud. What is God burning up? Now, if you said to that other person, "You. He's going to burn up you." Wrong answer. It's sin. God is a consuming fire, burning up your sin and my sin because sin is real and sin hurts people. Our mishandling of anger, scars people sometimes for life. And our lying manipulates people and leaves them feeling used. And some of our deepest sins, I think are the ones that we don't even acknowledge that we do like our cold indifference to other people.

And our idea is that God just overlooks all of that in us. That's our culture, like, "God is a nice guy and He just overlooks all of that stuff, unless you're really super duper bad and then God gets mad." But when you press folks on how super duper bad do you have to be before God gets angry at your sin, they all have a different answer. But they all agree on one thing, "However bad you have to be before God gets angry at your sin, is just a little bit more bad than me. Because after all, I am a good person." Meanwhile, we all have people in our lives that have been deeply hurt by our sin. See, God's wrath at sin is a corollary to His love. God hates sin because He loves you, so He opposes the sin that hurts us or keeps us from living the

abundant life He died to give us. A God of love has to be, must be a God who feels wrath at sin. If He loves us, He will feel wrath at sin because sin hurts us.

The opposite of love is not anger, the opposite of love isn't even hate. The opposite of love is indifference, and God is not indifferent to you. He came Himself in the Person of Jesus and died to pay the price for your sins and mind, that is anything but indifferent. If you want to know more about Jesus' love for you, you can just click in the chat or email us or call us. We would love to talk with you about how much Jesus loves you and what that means for your life. As I often say that the promise of Jesus is that God loves you just as you are not as you should be, but He also loves you enough not to leave you the way He found you. What that means is we don't have to clean up our act to come to Him. Jesus has, "Come just as you are all messed up, junked up, screwed up with sin. Come just as you are and I will make you a new person." He loves us just as we are, and He loves us so much, He doesn't leave us the way He found us.

Which brings me the constructive side of consuming fire, and that that God's love continuously renews us. The context for today's text is that Moses has led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and they're about to enter the promised land. Before they enter the promised land, he gives them a sermon, a very long sermon. It takes up the entire book of Deuteronomy, 34 chapters. It is a very long sermon. And right before the verses I just read, Moses says this, "The Lord brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of His inheritance, as you are now." An iron-smelting furnace is a constructive, not a destructive image of fire. Out of the trial of being slaves in Egypt and their escape from slavery, God was forging in them, a new character. He was burning away all the impurities so that they could emerge like true gold. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament echoes this chapter when it says, "God disciplines us for our good in order that we may share in His holiness.

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace. Peace, for those who have been trained by it." For our God is a consuming fire. Eugene Peterson paraphrases those verses this way, he says, "For God is not an indifferent bystander. He's actively cleaning house, torching all that needs to burn and He won't quit until it's all cleansed. God himself is fire." Is your God that big? Or is He a God who never corrects you? Always agrees with and approves everything you think and do. When was the last time you did something you didn't want to do because of God's commandments? Or when was the last time you didn't do something you wanted to do because of God's commandments? Or when was the last time you had to change your opinion about something because of something that you saw in the Bible? If it's been a while, you may be following a small indifferent God who does not care about you enough to correct you when you're going the wrong way.

But the God who comes to us in the Person of Jesus passionately loves us, which means He has to be, must be out to consume the sin that hurts us and keeps us from the abundant life He wants to give us. The last thing He is, is indifferent to you. He loves you with a furious, fiery, passion. Here's how that changes our lives. When we really get this not just in our heads, but deep in our hearts, when we experience His love ... not the deistic God of the enlightenment who is nothing but cold, sterile intellectualism. But when we are consumed by the burning furnace of love that is the heart of God, it makes our lives bigger, more passionate, and it

brings us greater courage. Again, we are all consumed with something. School, career, opportunities, problems, politics, anger, fear, shame. You're consumed with something, what is it? Because when we are consumed by God's love, it makes even an ordinary day bigger and it gives us more courage.

Prophet Jeremiah says this, "If I say I will not mention God's word or speak anymore in God's name, His Word is in my heart like a consuming fire, a fire shut up in my bones." Jeremiah is consumed with God's love. And as a result in the next verse, he goes on to say this, "I hear many whispering, 'Terror on every side.'" Do we hear that in our culture, "Terror"? Every time you turn on the news or read something on Facebook, "Terror, terror. Be afraid, be afraid, and you probably should be mad too." "But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior, so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. Sing to the Lord, give praise to the Lord." Jeremiah was consumed by the fire of God's love. And as a result, he had courage and he also had a harder life. For sure, a harder life, but also a bigger, more passionate life. There is no verse in the Bible that says, "And behold, it came to pass that Jeremiah was bored." When I was in graduate school, I remember going to this arty French film because there is no other kind.

And there was this one scene that went on for several minutes of showing milk dissolving in a cup of coffee. No music, no action, just dissolving milk in coffee for several minutes of screen time. I kept thinking, "And cut scene." But it just kept going. But I was with my fellow English lit graduate students, so I didn't feel like I could say, "This is boring." But inside I was thinking, "Lord, have mercy. Could we please have a car chase scene?" When we were there my wife always wanted to open up a cafe, a coffee shop called Cafe [foreign language 00:12:13]. That film would show nonstop. That film does not appear in the Bible. Nowhere in the Bible does it say the people who followed God experienced existential on weed. The people who were consumed with God's love were filled with passion and they did have harder lives, truth in advertising, they did have harder lives, but also a bigger, richer, deeper, better. Now, right about now some of you might be thinking, "Well, that's good, but I don't exactly have a consuming fire of love for God.

Some days it's just more like maybe a lit birthday candle of love, but that's it." And that I get that, I sometimes feel that way too. So here's the thing, the only way to set something on fire like a heart or life is you got to get closer to the flames. If God is a consuming fire, the closer we get to Him, the more on fire we will be. How do we do that? Let me give you three things. First, pray for it. In this chapter, Moses says, "If you seek the Lord, your God, you will find Him if you seek Him with all of your heart and with all of your soul." That means praying, that means asking for Him to fill you up. For the Lord, your God is a merciful God, He will not abandon or destroy you. Seek Him, spend time with Him in worship, and prayer and community. And as we've said, every sermon in this series, this is your homework for this week. Start every prayer you pray with this name for God, consuming fire. Pray, "Consuming fire, help me be consumed with love for You and nothing else."

Because ultimately, this is a supernatural thing and the Holy Spirit can set our hearts on fire. Second, we got to prioritize Jesus in everything we do, make time for Him in everything we do. We all have a consuming fire for something. What is it that is consuming you right now? What consumes your thoughts? Your time? Your energy? Your money? Whatever it is, that's your God. In today's text, Moses warns the Israelites against idolatry. He says, "Do not make for

yourselves an idol for the Lord your God is a consuming fire." And an idol is anything that becomes more important to us than God. And often they're very good things, career, or relationships, or success. They're good things, but if they become more important to our sense of happiness and security than God, then they have become idols and they wreck us. If it's success, we will become stressed out driven workaholics. If it's money, we'll be fearful of having enough. If it's a relationship, we will be consumed by fear that that person is going to leave us. If we are consumed with our idols, our idols will consume us.

So we need to make Jesus, our number one priority and integrate Him into everything we do, every minute of the day, responding to those nudges that He gives us at school, or work, or in our neighborhood. There is almost nothing I will miss about COVID when it is over, but there are two things I might miss about COVID when it's over and the first is this. One of our struggles has always been, how do we create community in a big church and really help people grow in their faith, especially when everyone's so busy? But man, this year, you guys have been so engaged this whole year. We've had record numbers of you all in groups, and you said that those are helping you feel connected and grow in your faith. Many of you have helped with the grocery project and other outreaches, you've come to our drive-throughs, you're attending, you're giving. Maybe that's because the pandemics cleared up some of the things that were on our calendar so you have more time, maybe it's you just feel more nudged to do those things.

Whatever it is, I really hope when COVID is over, we continue to prioritize growing in our faith and making time for that. COVID has erased some of the things that were making us busy, and this is the closest thing to a blank slate we are ever going to get as individuals and as a church. A blank slate is a terrible thing to waste, so let's be really picky about what we put back on our calendars and prioritize growing in our relationship with Jesus. The second thing I might miss when COVID is over is that I have received more angry emails, texts, Facebook messages this year than in any year prior. Some people are angry about how we handled COVID, some angry about how we've handled racial issues from both sides actually, some people angry because they feel we don't talk about race enough and should talk about it more, others angry that they feel like we talk about it too much.

I have received more angry comments this year than ever before and some of you right now are like, "That's what you're going to miss when COVID is over? Because we can totally keep those coming." Now, here's what I'm going to miss. At least just this year, those angry comments were about things that matter. In the last year, I have not received one angry email about the music, or complaining that people aren't dressed right for church or they're wearing jeans or a hat or something like that. It's almost as if COVID has forced us to focus on bigger things, and we're just grateful to be able to worship in whatever way we can. Now, it's okay to have our preferences and it's okay to let us know about your preferences. And thank you for caring about reverence in worship, that is important. But biblical reverence is always about the heart, not about what we sing, not about what we wear.

And if we're in worship annoyed about the music or how someone is dressed, in that moment, we're consumed with the thing that's annoying us and we're not being consumed with Jesus' love for us and with His glory and power and majesty, and that's not reverence. It makes us miserable, and it makes us annoyed, and it makes us feel upset. We don't have to do that,

and it's been a whole year since that has happened. BelPres, let's make that permanent because I firmly believe that if we prioritize Jesus, not the smaller things that so often consume us, myself included ... I can be very consumed by small things. Our lives are going to get bigger and more abundant. I have a growing conviction and I shared this with the staff this week. I have a growing conviction that as a church, our best days are still ahead of us. COVID has cleared some of the distractions and we build on an awesome foundation that so many of you have been working in this church and building in this church for decades and decades and decades.

I believe God is going to just continue to build on that foundation in exciting ways if we prioritize Jesus. It's like what Einstein said about driving a car. He said, "A man who could drive safely while kissing a beautiful woman, simply isn't giving the kiss the attention it deserves." I have no idea what the context for that quote was, but it is how we do our faith. If we get so consumed with other things, we aren't giving Jesus the attention He deserves. But when we prioritize Jesus, our lives get bigger and we have more courage. So let me give you a visual demonstration. I'm channeling my inner ... This is Lisa and Miss Laura. This jar is your soul, these ping pong balls are the things we're consumed with. Career, worry, fear, politics, the lies the devil tells us, "It's going to be terrible, you should be afraid. You're not good enough." All the junk in our souls, all the things that we're consumed with. And this water is Jesus and His love for you. And what happens ... Don't worry, we've got stuff down here so you don't have to freak out.

The carpet's going to be okay. What happens if we get more and more filled up with ... Oh, it didn't work. There we go. Some of those things that are messing us up just get pushed out of our soul. And even the ones that remain, they can't go down inside our soul, they just float along the surface. They have no impact on us. We have a choice. You're going to be consumed with something, it's either the ping pong balls or Jesus. You pick, your move. The more filled up with Jesus we are, the more these things get pushed out of our lives or are unable to sink in any deeper. Your move. Pray for it, prioritize Jesus. I'll move this out of the way. And then finally, finally lose control. I think one of the biggest things that keeps us from experiencing God's power and His miracles is our need for control. Because when we try to control, contain and tame God, then all we experience as a controlled, contained tamed God. And then we wonder, "Where is this power? Why don't I experience it?"

Most of my moments I've deeply experienced God have come when I've been a little out of control. Maybe it's in worship where I allow myself to experience emotions and maybe don't worry so much about what others are thinking. Some of my most intense experience of Jesus have been in prisons, or refugee camps, or slums. Not safe, not controlled, but God was so powerfully present. When we're consumed with Jesus and let Him interrupt our plans, even ordinary days ... you don't have to go on a mission trip. Even ordinary days become bigger. Prior to COVID a single man I know went on a six week mission trip to Nigeria and on his way back, he had scheduled a one day stopover in Vienna just to see the city, and then he had to get home and go back to work. He was by himself, so he decided to stay in a hostel to save money. But the day he was supposed to be in Vienna, he didn't feel very well. Some stomach stuff, probably something he ate. But he only had one day in Vienna, so he decided to try to sight see anyway.

But he didn't get very far from the hostel before he realized this is not going to work, and he had to go back. He was so mad. This was not his plan, his one day in Vienna was short. He was not in control of his day anymore. I'd have felt the same way. Well, that afternoon, a man came into the hostel where my friend was staying and they started talking and he asked my friend why he was in Vienna and my friend said that he'd been on a mission trip and he was on his way home to go back to work. That started a long conversation about God and the church. And in the middle of this, my friend got one of those nudges from the Holy Spirit, pulled out his Bible and started talking to this man about Jesus and how He came and died to pay the price for our sins, and how because of that, God forgives us. And that means we don't have to live in shame anymore. And this man said, "Oh, Jesus could never forgive me. I have done too many bad things, I can never be forgiven."

And my friend said, "Oh, oh, oh, you are especially the kind of person Jesus wants to forgive. He wants to forgive you and free you from that shame." So this man said, "Well, do I have to go to a church to get this forgiveness?" And my friend said, "No, you just have to ask for it." So he did and became a follower of Jesus and he was so excited because of the freedom from shame that Jesus gave him. In fact, before he left the Vienna, he wanted to take a picture with my friend and the Bible so he could put that picture on his desk at work and be reminded of Jesus' love for him and how Jesus is freedom from shame. My friend said the transformation in this man was dramatic. He said, he came in sad and he left just filled with joy. And my friend said that was a really good way to spend a day in Vienna. He said, "If I hadn't been feeling well, that conversation never would have happened."

I'd have seen some old buildings, maybe a museum or two, but it wouldn't have been nearly as fulfilling as experiencing God use me in someone else's life." And he said, "By the end, all I could focus on was Jesus." He wasn't consumed thinking about the day of sightseeing that he missed, he was consumed with Jesus' love. He was interrupted out of control of his schedule in his day, but he prioritized Jesus and Jesus burned away just a little more of the selfish desires within him to have things his way and filled him with holy love. So what are you consumed with? This week, start every prayer saying, "Consuming fire, help me be consumed with love for You." Because we are all consumed with something, even God. See, God chose what He was going to be consumed with, you. He is consumed with love for you. And when we experience the consuming fire of His love, all of life gets bigger.

So consuming fire, thank You for Your fierce love for us. And Lord, we ask that You help us experience that not just in our heads, but in our hearts so that we can be consumed with Your love and give it away to the people around us. Thank You for Your love, thank You for Your passion for us. Thank You for the lengths you were willing to go to get us back and to redeem us and to reclaim us. Lord, help us to live in light of that love and we'll give You the glory in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Deuteronomy 4:23-24

Opening Questions:

- Icebreaker: What is the best pair of shoes you've ever owned?
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions -- Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Has there been a time in your life when you experienced the consuming fire of God's love for you?
- What tends to consume you these days? Are there things you could do to help you be more consumed with God and his love for you?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?