

Our God is a consuming fire.--HEBREWS xii. 29

Nothing is unchangeable but love. Love which will be moved by prayer is imperfect and poor. In any event, it's not the love that is moved, but rather some other combination of things. For if someone prays and love conquers displeasure, then it's love which is asserting itself, rather than love giving even an inch to its claims. It's not love that gives something good against its will. Still less is it love which answers a prayer which would hurt or do wrong to the one who prays it. Love is a unity and love is changeless.

For the reason love loves at all is for the sake of purity. Love always has in view the absolute loveliness of what it beholds. Where loveliness is incomplete, and love can't love to its full measure, it strives to increase the loveliness, so that it may love even more. It strives for perfection, so that even love itself may be perfected; not perfected *in* itself, but perfected in the *object* of the love. Just as it was love which first created humanity, so also human love – in proportion to its divinity – will go on creating the beautiful in order to pour out its own love. Nothing is eternal except that which loves and that which can be loved. Love is always climbing towards the wrapping-up of everything, when the universe will be imperishable and divine. Therefore, all that is not beautiful in the beloved, and all that comes between, must be destroyed.

And our God is a consuming fire.

If this is difficult to understand, it's in the same way as the simple, absolute truth is difficult to understand. It may take centuries of time before a man comes to see a truth – age upon age of conflict, effort and desire. But as soon as he sees it, it's so plain that he wonders how he could have lived without seeing it. The only reason he didn't understand it sooner was that he didn't see it.

To see a truth, to know what it is, to understand it, and to love it, are all the same thing. Before the eyes see clearly and the darkness of the night filled with dreams gives way to the light of the sun of truth, there is much movement towards it, many sorrows because of it, many pangs of conscience due to its neglect, and many dim longings for it as a need unknown. But once it's seen, it's seen forever. To see even one divine fact is to stand face to face with the essence of eternal life.

God has been working to bring about this vision of truth for age upon age. The whole workings of God's science, history and poetry were evolving truth upon truth for this simple condition of seeing truth. This seeing of truth is the pinnacle of life; a man who sees it can't work out why he can't cause other men to see as he sees. As long as there is one human soul whose eyes have yet to be opened, whose child-heart has not yet been born in him, God will patiently labour to bring about the vision of truth. All the plans of God have flowed out in different and uncountable forms since the foundation of the world, in order to cause all of humanity to see truth.

In the same way, the divine destruction has been going on for the same purpose. This purpose is so that God's life might be our life, so that the same consuming fire which is the essence of love might also live in us. Let's now look at the words of the apostle which are crowned with this lovely terror: "Our God is a consuming fire."

"Since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let's have grace, so we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire."

We have received a kingdom that can't be moved – a kingdom whose very nature is immovable. Let's have grace to serve the Consuming Fire, our God, with divine fear; not with a fear that cringes and craves, but instead with the humbling of all thoughts, pleasures and loves before the one who is the life of them all, and who will have them all pure.

The kingdom he has given us can't be moved, because it has nothing weak and movable in it. It is of the eternal world, the world of existence, of truth. Therefore, we must worship him with a fear as pure as the kingdom is unshakeable. He will shake heaven and earth, so that only the unshakeable will remain (v. 27); he is a consuming fire, so that only what cannot be consumed will remain forever.

It's the very nature of God – so terribly pure that it destroys all that is not pure – which demands the same purity in our worship. He will have our purity. It's not at all that the fire will burn us if we don't worship in purity; it's that the fire will burn us until we do worship in purity. What's more, it will continue burning within us after everything which is foreign to it has given way to its force. It will no longer burn with pain and consuming, but now as the highest consciousness of life, the presence of God.

When evil – which alone is able to be consumed – will have been destroyed in his fire, from those who live in the immovable kingdom, then the nature of man will look the nature of God in the face. Man's fear will then be pure; for an eternal and holy fear must spring from a knowledge of the nature, not from a sense of its power.

But whatever cannot be consumed must be one within itself, an existence of simplicity. Therefore, in such a soul, the fear towards God will be one with the homeliest love. Indeed, the fear of God will cause a man to flee – not from God – but from himself; not from God, but to God, the Father of himself. He will flee in terror in case he wrongs God or his neighbour. And the first words which follow for the purpose of serving God acceptably are these: "Let brotherly love continue." To love our brother is to worship the Consuming Fire.

The symbol of *the consuming fire* seems to have been suggested to the writer by the fire which burned on Mount Sinai. That fire was part of the revelation which God made there to the Israelites. Nor was it the first instance of such a revelation. The symbol of God's presence was a fire that *did not consume the bush in which it burned*. When he saw this symbol, Moses had to take off his shoes; it was not safe for him to draw near. Both revelations were of terror. But the same symbol used by a New Testament writer should mean more – not more than it meant before, since it couldn't have been used to express more than they could understand – but more than it was used to express previously.

Consider the nation of Israel; a nation of slaves, into whose souls the rust of their chains had eaten, in whose memory lingered the smoke of Egypt, who wanted to go back to slavery rather than eat the manna. What else could this nation have seen in that fire apart from terror and destruction? How would they even understand purification by fire? They had no way of inventing such a thought. And even if they had, the idea of the suffering involved would soon have overwhelmed the idea of purification. Nor would such a nation have listened to any teaching that was not founded on terror. Fear was what they were used to; they had no worship for any being of whom they did not have to be afraid.

So was this show on Mount Sinai simply a way of making them obey, in the same way that bad nurses do with children? Was there a hint of vague and false horror? Is it possible this was not a true revelation of God?

If it wasn't a true revelation, then it was no revelation at all, and the story is either false, or the whole display was a political trick of Moses. Those who can read Moses' mind won't easily believe the latter, and those who understand the scope of the supposed revelation will see no reason to believe the former. Even if it was a deception, that which would be political is not automatically excluded from the possibility of another source. Some people believe so little in an ordered cosmos, that the very argument of purpose is enough reason for their unbelief.

In any event, if God showed them these things, God showed them what was true. It was a revelation of himself. He will not wear a mask. He puts on a face. He won't speak out of a flaming fire if that flaming fire is foreign to him, if there is nothing within him for that flaming fire to reveal. He won't terrify his children with a lie, even if his children are crude and uncivilised.

It was a revelation, but only a partial one. It was a true symbol, but not a complete vision.

No revelation can be anything other than partial. If a man must be told the whole truth in order to have a true revelation, then it's goodbye to revelation; indeed, it's goodbye to sonship. For what revelation, other than a partial one, can even the highest spiritual condition receive of the infinite God?

Nevertheless, the revelation is not untrue simply because it's only partial. To someone in a lower condition, a more partial revelation might be truer than a more complete revelation would be to someone in a higher condition. The more partial revelation might reveal a lot to him, whereas the more complete revelation might reveal nothing. Regardless of what it revealed, though, if the nature of the revelation meant that it stopped development and growth, and chained the man to its incompleteness, it would only be a false revelation fighting against all the divine laws of human existence. The true revelation awakens the desire to know more because of the truth of its incompleteness.

Here was a nation at its lowest. Could it receive anything except a partial revelation, a revelation of fear? How would the Hebrews be anything other than terrified at what was opposed to all they knew of themselves, since they were beings who thought it was good to worship a golden calf? Seeing as they were what they were, they were wise to be afraid. Given that they acknowledged the terror above them, they were better off doing so than stooping to worship the idol below them.

Fear is better than no God, better than a god made with hands. Hidden in that fear lay the sense of the infinite. The worship of fear is true; it's very low, however, and although not acceptable to God in itself – for only worship in spirit and truth is acceptable to him – it's still precious in his sight. For he sees men not just as they are, but also as they will be; not just as they are, but also as they are now growing (or capable of growing) towards the image of himself in which he made them.

And so a thousand stages, each in itself basically of no value, are still of incalculable value as the necessary and connected steps of an infinite progress. A condition which would indicate a devil if it were of decay, would indicate a saint when it's of growth.

To summarise then: even though the revelation was not final nor complete, and even though it called upon the best of which they were capable, it was probably a true one, and could make future and higher revelation possible to them.

But we'll find that this very revelation of fire is, in a higher sense, as true to the mind of the rejoicing saint as it is to the mind of the trembling sinner. For the saint sees farther into the meaning of the fire, and has a better idea of what it will do to him. It is a symbol which needed to be unfolded, not replaced. As long as men abide *with* their sins, and as long as they feel that they would no longer be themselves if separated from their sins, how can they understand that the fire is a Saviour? How can they see that this idea wants to separate the man from the evil; wants to slay the sin and give life to the sinner? Can it comfort them to be told that God loves them and he will therefore burn them clean? Can the cleansing of fire appear to be anything other than torture – which is what, to them, it must always be? They don't want to be clean, and they can't bear to be tortured. Is it then possible for them to do anything other than fear God with the fear of the wicked, until they learn to love him with the love of the holy? Is it possible for us to desire it? To them, Mount Sinai is crowned with the signs of revenge and terror. And after all, isn't it true that God is ready to do to them as they fear, albeit with a different purpose and goal from what they imagine?

He is against sin. Therefore, while they and sin are as one, he is against them – against their desires, their goals, their fears and their hopes. And so, in this way he is always and completely *for them*. The thunder, lighting and storm, the darkness with the sound of a trumpet, the visible horror with the voice of words, was just a faint image to them of what God thinks and feels about vileness and selfishness. It was an image of the ongoing repulsion with which he regards these things. It was a faint image so that the people, even while fearing to do as they wanted, might leave a little room for grace to grow in them. After a time, that grace would make them see that the evil, and not the fire, is the fearful thing. God would change them so

much that they would gladly rush up into the trumpet-blast of Sinai in order to escape the flutes around the golden calf. If they could have understood this, they would not have needed Mound Sinai. The revelation was true, and needed to be partial – it was partial so that it would be true.

Even Moses, the man of God, was not ready to receive the revelation; although out of love to his people he prayed that God would blot him out of his book of life. If this means that he offered to give himself as a sacrifice *instead* of them, it shows why he could not be given the vision of the Redeemer. For in this way, he thought he could appease God, not realising that God was as tender as himself. He couldn't see that God is the Reconciler and the Redeemer, nor that the sacrifice of the heart is the only atonement for which he cares. Moses wanted to be blotted out, so that their names would be kept in. Certainly, when God told him that the one who sinned should suffer for it, Moses couldn't see that this was the kindest thing that God could do.

But I doubt whether this is what Moses meant. It seems instead to be the speech of a divine despair: he wouldn't survive the children of his people. He didn't care for a love which would save only him, but send to the dust those thousands of calf-worshipping brothers and sisters. In any case, how much would Moses have understood, if he had seen the face instead of the back of what passed the broken rock within the thunderous clouds of Sinai?

Consider that face. That face, after all, was the face of him who was more than any man. It was the face through which the divine plan would show itself to the eyes of men – at the time, bowed in anticipation of the crown with which the descendants of the Israelites would one day crown him. It was the face of him who was then bearing their griefs and sorrows, and who now bears our griefs and sorrows. It was the face of the Son of God. Instead of accepting the sacrifice of one of his creatures to satisfy his justice or support his dignity, he gave himself completely to them. In doing so, he gave himself completely to the Father by doing his lovely will. He suffered even to death, not so that men would not suffer, but so that their suffering would be like his, and lead them towards his perfection. If that face had turned and looked at Moses, would Moses have lived? Wouldn't he have died – not from its splendour, not because of sorrow – but from the actual sight of something which could not be comprehended? If infinite mystery hadn't killed him, then seeing that God was altogether unknown, wouldn't he nevertheless have gone about dazed, doing nothing, and having nothing else to do in the world? To him, such a full revelation would not only *not* be a revelation, but would also be the *destruction* of all revelation.

"Surely then it would be hurtful to say that God is love, all love, and nothing other than love? And it's not enough for you to answer that it's the truth, even though it may be. Based on your own words, too much revelation may hurt by dazzling and blinding."

There's a big difference between a mystery of God that no man understands, and a mystery of God laid hold of by even one man. The latter is already a revelation, and passing through that man's mind, will be presented so that it won't hurt his fellow men. Let God conceal as he likes: the light which any man has received isn't given so it can be put under a lampshade; it's for him and his fellow men. (I believe, though, that he is actually forever destroying hiddenness and forever giving all that he can, and all that men can receive; he does not want to conceal anything but wants to reveal everything).

Just because there are thorns and stony places and waysides doesn't mean God won't sow the seed. He will suppose that in some cases even a bird may carry the message, or that the good seed might be too much for the thorns, or that whatever dries up on the stones might leave in its place a deeper soil for the next seed to take root. Besides, the only ones who can receive the doctrine are those who have ears to hear. If the selfish man was able to believe it, he would misinterpret it; but he can't believe it. It's not possible that he can believe it. But the loving soul, weighed down by false teaching, or partial truth claiming to be the whole truth, will hear it, understand it, and rejoice in it.

When we say that God is love, do we teach men that their fear of him has no basis in reality? No. As much as they fear will happen to them, and possibly far more. But there is something beyond their fear – a divine fate which they can't withstand – because it works along with the human uniqueness which God has created in them. The wrath will consume what they think of as themselves, so that the selves God made will appear. When they appear, they'll appear with ten times as much awareness of their existence, and will bring with them everything that contributed to the blessedness of the life they tried to lead without God.

But they'll realise that for the first time they are fully themselves. The old man who is tired, selfish, suspicious and greedy will have passed away. The young self, the one that's forever young, will remain. Whatever they *thought* was themselves will have vanished; whatever they *felt* themselves to be – despite them misjudging their feelings – will remain, and remain glorified in repentant hope. For whatever cannot be shaken will remain. Whatever is immortal in God will remain in man. The death that is in them will be consumed.

It's the law of Nature – that is, the law of God – that everything that is destructible will be destroyed. When that which is immortal buries itself in the destructible, it can't – even though it's immortal – know its own immortality. This is because it receives all messages from outside itself, through the encircling region of decadence, but none from within the eternal doors. The destructible must be burned out of it, or at least begin to be burned out of it, before it can have a *part* in eternal life. When the destructible is completely burned away and gone, then it has eternal life. Or rather, when the fire of eternal life has taken hold of a man, then the destructible has gone completely, and he is pure.

Many a man's work must be burned, so that by that very burning, he may be saved – “so as by fire”. Up in smoke go the lordships and the titles of the world; the man who stays within the burning is saved by the fire. This is because it has destroyed the destructible, which is the stronghold of the deathly, which would destroy both body and soul in hell. If he still clings to that which can be burned, then the burning goes on deeper and deeper into his very being, until it reaches the roots of the lie that enslaves him – possibly by looking like the truth.

The man who loves God, but is not yet pure, welcomes the burning of God. And it's not always torture. The fire shows itself sometimes only as light; nevertheless, it will be fire of purification. The consuming fire is simply the original, the active form of Purity – that which is indeed pure, that which is indeed Love, the creative energy of God. Without purity there can be no creation and no continuation of creation. Whatever is not pure is corruptible, and corruption cannot inherit incorruption.

The man whose deeds are evil, fears the burning. But the burning won't be less of a burning simply because he fears it or denies it. Escape is hopeless. For love will not be moved. Our God is a consuming fire. He will not come out until he has paid the very last penny.

If the man resists the burning of God, which is the consuming fire of Love, then a terrible future awaits him, and its day will come. He who hates the fire of God will be cast into the outer darkness. What sick terror will then overtake him! For even if a man thinks and cares nothing about God, nevertheless, he still does not exist without God. God is here with him, upholding him, warming him, delighting him, teaching him, and making life a good thing to him. God gives himself to him, though he doesn't know it.

But when God withdraws from a man as far as is possible without the man's stopping to exist; when the man feels completely abandoned, hanging in a neverending vertigo of existence upon the edge of his being, without support, refuge, goal or end, then he will listen in his agony for the faintest sound of life from the closed door. Then, if the moan of suffering humanity ever reaches the ear of the outcast of darkness, he will be ready to rush into the very heart of the Consuming Fire to know life once more, to come out of this terrifying and sick nothingness, this unspeakable death, into that region of painful hope.

It's impossible for our imaginations to imagine a horror too great: the horror of being without God is the one and only living death. Isn't this death

...worse than the worst death imagined by those evil men who howl with terror?

It is, but with this divine difference: that the outer darkness is merely the most dreadful form of the consuming fire – the fire without light – the visible darkness, the black flame. God has withdrawn himself but has not lost his grip on the man. His face is turned away, but his hand is still upon him. His heart has stopped beating into the man's heart, but he keeps him alive by his fire. And that fire will go on searching and burning into him, just as it will into the highest saint who is not yet pure as he is pure.

But in the end, O God, will you not cast Death and Hell into the lake of Fire – even into your own consuming self? Death will then die forever,

And hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

Then indeed will you be all in all. For then our poor brothers and sisters, every one of them – O God, we trust in you, the Consuming Fire – will have been burnt clean and brought home. For if their moans, centuries of ages away, would turn heaven for us into hell, can it really be possible that a man should be more merciful than God? Will it be his mercy, alone of all his glories, which will not be infinite? Will a brother love a brother more than The Father loves a son? More than The Brother Christ loves his brother? Wouldn't he die yet again to save one more brother?

As for us, now we will come to you, our Consuming Fire. And you will not burn us more than we can bear. But you will burn us. And although it seems like you're killing us, yet we will trust in you even for that which you have not spoken of, so that by any means possible, we may attain to the blessedness of those who have not seen and yet have believed.

THE END

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