

“If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Eat the wrong food, and you will pay for it. I love spicy foods like hot chicken wings, hot chili, and spicy tacos. But those types of food can catch up with you and bring forth a great pain which we call heartburn. That heartburn can, at times, be more than a mere inconvenience; in some people it is so severe, it can mimic the pain of a heart attack. If you have ever experienced that kind of pain, it can be enough to make you swear off of spicy foods forever.

But did you know that there is a type of heartburn that is actually good for you? This heartburn is not caused by eating the wrong foods. It is not a digestive problem that will be solved by taking Tums or Alka Seltzer. It is the type of heartburn which Jeremiah speaks of in our text today, as he speaks of the fire within his heart that sets him on fire for the Lord. It is the type of heartburn which the two disciples on the road to Emmaus felt when the resurrected Lord walked and talked with them, so that they say: ***“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”*** (Luke 24:32, ESV) It is the burning in our hearts that is caused by the word of God at work in our hearts—and may God give us all this wonderful heartburn, this burning zeal for His word that sets us on fire for Him, too!

God’s word is like a fire in our hearts. When we think of fire, we are first aware of its destructive power. Fire can destroy a home in a matter of minutes; it can kill in a matter of seconds. Over the past few years we have seen far too often how a small spark in a forest can turn into a raging inferno that can destroy thousands of acres of timberland, homes and communities. When we lived in Port Colborne it was a standing joke—although it really wasn’t funny—that every night the Buffalo evening news always seemed to have a report on a major, destructive fire. God says that His word has that same destructive power. He told Jeremiah: ***“Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”*** (Jeremiah 23:29, ESV) Jeremiah was sent to proclaim God’s displeasure with His people. They had forgotten His commandments. They were worshipping the idols of their neighbours. God had seen their lack of faith and their total disregard for His word, and now He declared that His word would be a consuming fire. Through Jeremiah, God declared that a terrible fate awaited His unfaithful people. Jerusalem would be destroyed, and the people taken into captivity. He would punish their wickedness. As fire consumes wood, so they, too, would be consumed. And that fire is still in God’s word. He still declares that those who disobey Him will suffer eternal torment in the fires of hell. All who ignore His commands, who follow their own will rather than His holy will, shall experience the consuming fire, the burning judgement of God’s word.

But fire does not only destroy. Fire has many useful and helpful purposes. Without fire, we could not survive the cold of winter. Try barbequing without fire; you will end up eating your food raw. Fire provides warmth and light. It can purify water as we use it to boil the water; it can smelt metals and make them more useful to us. While our use of electricity today has changed the way in which we do things, the truth is, much of the comfort of our lives today is based upon the energy that fire itself has provided in the past. In an even greater way, God’s Word is a good fire in our hearts. His word can melt our icy coldness that leads to a lack of love for Him and for one another. His Word is the fire that burns away our stubbornness and leads us from sin to repentance. His word can touch the coldest of hearts and bring a warmth that other people feel. It can purify; it can empower; it can even bring forth new life. There are certain varieties of pine trees which only reproduce in a forest fire, because the pine cones will only open to release their seeds in intense heat—the heat of a forest fire. In the same way, God’s Word burns out the old, the sinful lusts, the worldly part of us and kindles something new within us: a life that is set on heavenly things. God’s Word purifies by consuming the evil of our hearts and the desires that lead to sin. And that word refines us like silver is refined, so that its fire burns away the slag and leaves the pure, workable metal. When that Word takes root in our hearts, it gives us a case of spiritual heartburn that can set our whole lives on fire in a wonderful, positive way.

When the Spirit descended upon the believers at Pentecost, He appeared as tongues of fire on them—and that fire changed their lives. That is the same fire that burns in the hearts of all believers. In a Pentecost hymn, Luther wrote: *O sweetest Love, Your grace on us bestow; set our hearts with sacred fire aglow.* (LSB 768, st. 2) That is exactly what the Spirit does. He sets our hearts on fire, just as He set Jeremiah’s heart on fire for the Lord. That fire within made all the difference for Jeremiah, especially when he was struggling with his calling as a prophet. We heard his frustration and complaint in the Old Testament lesson today.

He was tired of being a doom and gloom prophet. Because he was always proclaiming God's coming judgment to a people who didn't want to hear any of that judgment, he had been beaten, imprisoned, and locked up in stocks. Even his friends were looking for some way to trap him, just waiting for his downfall. It should be easy for us to see that this didn't make Jeremiah's life easy. He didn't like the controversy. He didn't like being the bearer of bad news. He wanted to give up, to pack it all in. But then, he had this attack of spiritual heartburn. ***"If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."*** Jeremiah had to speak that word, because that fire within could not be contained. His heart belonged to God, and when he tried to ignore God or forget his mission, then his heartburn reminded him of the need to carry on in his ministry.

Do we feel that same fire within us? Are we on fire for the Lord, or have we found ways to quench His fire? Does His goodness, grace and mercy in us just have to come out? One of the biggest problems facing the Christian church today is apathy, an apathy that somehow has managed to quench the fire within us. That is why so many people find it easy to skip church services, especially in the summer. That's why so many people are too busy to help with things that need to be done around the church. That is why so many people fail to be good stewards of their time, their talents and their treasures when it comes to using their gifts to the glory of God. And that is why so many Christians today are not worried about those people around them who are dying in unbelief because they do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. But why would we want to quench this fire? We have the best news that the world could ever know! Jesus Christ died to take away our sins. He rose to give life to all who believe in Him. He lives as the help, the consolation, and the Saviour of those who are lost and troubled and dying in this world. Our hearts should be burning with this message, this good news that just has to come forth. This good news should set us on fire; it should lead us to do great things for God. And it should lead us to share with others the wonderful deeds of our Saviour, who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.

Jeremiah was a prophet of doom and gloom, but he also had words of hope for God's people. The Lord says through His prophet: ***"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*** (Jeremiah 31:31-34, ESV)

That message of forgiveness is the good news God has given His church. It is a message of hope and salvation. We don't have to be the prophets of doom and gloom. We are to tell others what God has done to save us, to give us life as His people. In our gospel lesson today, we heard Jesus tell the disciples: ***"What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops."*** (Matthew 10:27, ESV) Jesus is saying: "let that word that burns within you burst forth so that all may hear and know its saving power. Don't be afraid to speak up, to speak out and to confess the hope that is within you. People need that message, so let it be spoken, loudly and clearly." And Jesus makes a promise: ***"So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,"*** (Matthew 10:32, ESV)

When the good news of the Saviour is real and alive for us, it is like a fire burning within us. That fire within us will manifest itself in many ways. It shows itself in our faithful service to God and to His church. It shows itself in the way we sing our hymns and in the joyful way we help and encourage one another. It shows itself in a burning desire to share the hope that is within us with others, so that we are like the disciples who said: ***"we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."*** (Acts 4:20, ESV) Jeremiah found that, try as hard as he would, he could not contain the fire within him. He had to speak, he had to work for the Lord, even in the worst of situations, because the Lord and His word meant everything to him. God was His Saviour. God was the one who had taken away His sin and given Him life. We know all that, and even more. We know what Jesus Christ has done that we might have life forever. We know His sacrifice for us on the cross. We know the joy and life-giving power of His resurrection. That should set our hearts on fire, with a consuming passion that leads us to do great things for God, and with a great desire to share our hope with others. Lord, set our hearts with heavenly fire aglow. Let us burn for you, and yearn to share your good news with others, that they may know the fire of your love, too. Amen.