

A BURNING HEART

**LIVING IN THE FIRE OF THE
FATHER'S FIERCE LOVE**

Dave Olson

All that I have said is as nothing compared to what I feel within, the witnessed correspondence of love between God and the Soul; for when God sees the Soul pure as it was in its origins, He tugs at it with a glance, draws it and binds it to Himself with a fiery love that by itself could annihilate the immortal soul. In so acting, God so transforms the soul in Him that it knows nothing other than God; and He continues to draw it up into His fiery love until He restores it to that pure state from which it first issued. As it is being drawn upwards, the soul feels itself melting in the fire of that love of its sweet God, for He will not cease until He has brought the soul to its perfection.

Catherine of Genoa

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PREFACE

I wanted to write a book about God as Father, but found that first I had to learn what it means to be a son. I wanted to write about Jesus the Bridegroom, but found I first had to learn what it feels like to be a bride. I am still on my journey of discovery in these regions of my being. It seems like every day reveals some new flower of beauty or exposes a hidden cave of mystery. The journey itself is the way I am learning about Father God.

This book is the journal of my travels. Not that it reads like a seafarer's diary, but in it I describe some of the coasts on which I have landed and what I learned there. I am reluctant to record these, because each needs more exploration, and more reflection will change the interpretations. Yet, since your journey follows the route God has charted for you and is not the same as mine, I set my observations before you in confidence that your own discoveries will teach you how to apply these.

INTRODUCTION

This is an intense book. It is meant to be. It is about discovering an intense fire, the fire of your own love and the Father's love of you.

The material in this book has been compressed into me by decades of study and meditation on the Scriptures, by years of involvement in different forms of ministry in and to the Christian church, grappling with how the ways of God are reflected and distorted in the ways we work, by the joys and fruit of these efforts, by the weight of grief from losses and brokenness in my life, and by sorrow over my failures to love, as a father, a husband, and as a man in relationship with others.

Yet, it has been by receiving these things as fuel for the fire that I have come to know the love of the Father more deeply. These things are part of my joy now, for they have brought me home to His heart.

Receiving takes time. It takes time to realize what is being given. It takes time to understand the message being communicated. It takes time to let the love in the gift sink into your heart. So, I urge you to take time as you read these pages. Take time to receive the Father's message of love to you and to listen to the beating of your own love for Him.

1

Children of the Father

*Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father,
and it is enough for us."*

This is the plea in each of our hearts. We long to see a Father who lives in complete integrity. We want to know a Father who loves unreservedly. We desire the blessing of a Father who knows us completely and releases us into our true destiny. Philip's child-like question abides within the child heart of each of us. We want to be children in the love of a true Father.

We have such a Father. Jesus did show the disciples, and us, the Father.

*Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with
you, and yet you have not come to know Me,
Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the
Father.*

John 14:8 (above) & 9

Jesus' life and message revealed God as the Father, and invites us to be children with Him.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name. John 1:12

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. Rom. 8:16

See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. I John 3:1

We are children in relationship to Father God. We get to be children with Him. We can rest in His love. We can rely on His strength to support us. We can receive His comfort. We can count on His patience with us. We can feel delight from His smile upon us.

We will always be children with Him. He is always our Father, so we are always a child next to Him. He is always available to us, open to welcome us with love and blessing, as Jesus demonstrated with children:

Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Matt. 19:13-14

We learn this as our earliest discovery of our relationship with God through Jesus. It is the first element of our new identity in Christ. It gives us the security we desire in knowing we belong to God's eternal family. It describes the sweetness of our relationship with the Father who has rescued and adopted us.

This remains in us as a life-long comfort and joy: I am a loved child of my Father.

We do not remain children, however. We are not only children, we are sons and daughters of our Father. We are not only little ones in His care, we are becoming the bride of His Son. We are brought into relationship with God the Father and Jesus the Son not only to be secure children, but to enter into the “full rights of sons” (Gal. 4:5 NIV), not only to enjoy the grace of His love, but to mature into the bride who has made herself ready (Rev. 19:7).

Grown sons and daughters have a richer love between themselves and their father than do children. Brides have a more intense love of their future husband than do friends in early acquaintance. It is this richer, more intense love which is the subject of this book. I trust that you have experienced the sweet relationship of a child of God the Father. I trust that you have felt the powerful, personal attentions of Jesus the Savior. Now you are ready to grasp more intimate expressions of His love for you, and to discover within your heart a deeper, stronger love for Him.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Eph. 4:17-19

2

You've Never Known a Father Like This

“Our Father”

“To my Father and your Father”

“Abba, Father”

Father, Daddy, Poppa; what images do these release in your imagination? A man sure in himself, present in love, available to you? A dominating, self-absorbed, rough individual? Do you have hardly an image at all: someone distant, quiet, uninvolved in your life? Whatever your image of a father, this has influenced your image of God as Father. A good father, no matter how strong and caring, falls short of the character of God the true Father. A poor, or absent, father constricts our ability to trust the fatherhood of God.

However, we need to learn fathering from God, rather than take our image of God from our fathers. In the Bible we have some vivid pictures of God the Father. Looking at these to see what the true Father is like can teach us to trust Him and receive His love.

In His image

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" Gen. 1:26

When God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, felt the longing to make the being who was to inhabit His creation, the one He could commune with and pour His love upon, He wanted a son in His own image. You can feel in this every father's desire, every mother's hope: that their child will reflect *them*; that in his face, in her eyes, they will see something of themselves; that in her manner, in his expressions they will hear their own values. They can't help it. Parents know that each child is an individual, and they want their child to grow into their own identity. Yet, from the moment of conception there is stored in the parent's heart a longing that this child will show something of their own image.

So it is with God. He unabashedly declares His desire that the child whom He forms, the son and daughter He brings to life, will have His image. He wants children who are like Himself. He is a *father*, not a designer putting the finishing touch on his masterpiece. He is risking His heart, just as every parent does when he, when she, give themselves to the act of bring a child into life.

But He does not compel the shape which this will take. From the moment He releases them into the Garden, God gives Adam and Eve the freedom to mature in His image, or to deface it by their will. He is not a parent who controls every aspect of the child's development so that she or he becomes the star the parent fantasizes herself to be, or the tycoon he wishes he could be. But God is a parent who waits eagerly to see how His own image will show in the life of His child.

Because He loves being a Father. He gives birth with a Mother's love.

Over His creation.

"...and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." Gen. 1:26, continued

My grandfather and his brother started a business in the agricultural valley where they lived, designing, manufacturing, and repairing equipment to serve the needs of farmers. My father and his brother developed and expanded it until it became known throughout the region. But neither my brother or I, nor our sisters, had the aptitude or interest to take over the business. So, now Olson Bros. Mfg. Co. no longer exists. I have a deep sense of loss from this. My father never pressured any of us to come into the business, nor has he ever expressed any disappointment over its closing. Yet, something feels wrong to me. A family business should continue. The family farm should continue to be worked by sons, daughters, and grandchildren. It is a father's desire to see his children continue and extend the work he inherited or built.

God the Father gives to Adam and Eve His "business." He turns over to them the farm. He says, "It is yours now. Build it up and develop it." The earth He created certainly was His joy. Everything about the earth speaks of joy, careful design, and abundance. For God to give dominion over His precious creation to His sons and daughters reveals His fatherly desire to watch them enjoy the fruit of His work, and to see what they do with it.

Yes, God is Creator. But, in this gesture He reveals His Father heart. He shows His desire that we have His best. Yet, He yields the rights and authority into our hands, with fear and hope. He gives us the respect of a loving father who believes in His children.

Because He is a confident Father. He releases with a Mother's strength.

Bearing His legacy

And Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir. And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Gen. 15:2-4

And behold, the LORD stood above it and said (to Jacob), "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants shall also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will

*bring you back to this land; for I will not leave
you until I have done what I have promised
you." 28:13-15*

When Abram cries out to God for an heir, he is losing the agony of his father's heart: Where is the son who will bear my name, who will carry my legacy? It seems that God shares his pain. Like an anxious father Himself, He affirms that it will be a son of Abram's own loins in whom the promise will be fulfilled. God has Himself purposed that it will be His own Son who will inherit the promise (see Psalm 2), and He understands Abram's desperation for a son as heir, not a servant.

We hear this singular hope expressed again in the promise to Jacob. From father to son, and father to son again is the promise given. The promise needs a son to receive it. The legacy must have a son to fulfill it. The promise also needs a daughter to share the bearing. Sarah, wife of Abram, Rebecca, wife of Isaac, and Leah and Rachel, wives of Jacob must come from the same family, the same line of Terah as the men, because the bearer of the legacy must be a full-blood child of the family line. Mother and father together bring forth the daughters and sons through whom the promise continues.

God knows the resignation parents feel when they must divide up their property and business among distant relatives because they have no child to receive it. He has the same passion to know that what has been gained in one generation will be carried on into the next, and on and on.

Because He is a Father seeking sons, a Mother wanting daughters.

Learning His jealousy

Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Gen. 3:9-11

When we read the words, "Where are you?", each of us hears the voice of our father, or our mother. The tone which we hear in this call into Adam and Eve's hiding place in the garden is the tone which we are familiar with from when we were sought out after some misbehavior. Is it for you the harsh threatening sound of a parent ready to inflict speedy punishment? Is it the stern demanding sound of one who has already determined the penalty?

Or, can you hear in these words the agonized cry of one wounded by betrayal? "Why have you done this? What made you break my trust in you, give up your trust in me? Why are you hiding from my love?" It is a broken-hearted Father who calls to Adam and Eve, not an outraged tyrant. The whole dialogue around the episode of eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree is a plea for restoration from the Father who has been disobeyed. He cannot violate His own decree, but He wants these two to remain as close as their new defiant posture will allow.

I believe we should read the judgments of the prophets in the same way. Rather than being an attack of I'll-get-you-for-this, they are the tearful cry, "How could you treat me like this?"

And the LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. Go, and proclaim these words toward the north and say, 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD; 'I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious,' declares the LORD; 'I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the LORD your God And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the LORD. Jer. 3:11-13

God's anger is not that of a general whose commands have been ignored, but that of a Father whose provision has been disdained, even destroyed. It pours out of the pain of a lover betrayed, an engagement violated. His severe words, spoken through the prophets from Samuel through John in The Revelation, are the expressions of one trying desperately to salvage the relationship while demanding a full cleansing of the offense.

We can only hear this pleading tone in God's voice if we are first convinced of His love for those whom He pursues. This prior love is declared from the beginning of creation to the climax of the heavenly city (Rev. 21). When we let the proven love of God clear our ears, we hear His Father's heart in the words that would otherwise terrify us. It is His determined love which makes Him severe with our disobedience.

Because He is a Father fully committed to relationship with His children. He battles for it with a Mother's dedication.

As a father's only son

And He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there ...

And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Gen. 22:2, 12

There is an intense mystery in this story. How could God the Creator ask for a human sacrifice? How could He put Abraham, whom He had promised to bless, to such a severe test? What kind of a father does this? These elements are part of the drama of the salvation saga, which prepare us to see the depth of God's own commitment to fulfill *all* to bring us redemption. What I want to show through this is the empathy of God, father to father, with Abraham.

God's Father heart is revealed in the way He puts this challenge to Abraham: "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love." God can feel the love Abraham has for his son, because He too is a Father. God grasps the conflict which this puts in Abraham, because He too will face this agony, when He gives His Son Jesus over to be sacrificed. The words which God uses with Abraham come from His own Father's heart, for they are what He speaks to His Son at His baptism,

Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in

bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well-pleased." Luke 3:21-22

God is a Father who knows the joy of loving an only Son, and the agony of giving him up. His heart beats with the fervor which flows through the heart of any father or mother when they look upon their precious child. Although Jesus is God's "only begotten" (John 1:18), unique Son, all those who receive Jesus become His children (John 1:12) and come into the Fatherly love of God.

Because He is an enthusiastic Father. He has a mother's desire for children.

A father to the rescue

And the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, ... And now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." Exodus 3:7-10

God is a Father who does not forget His children. They are never out of His thoughts (Psalm 139:17). He is alert and ready to deliver them. He also knows when to act and when to

wait, as Jesus showed in the parable of the father waiting for his son to return (Luke 15:11-24). That we may think He waits too long does not diminish the truth of His love and desire to save. It is agony on Him to delay, as well as on us.

*How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I
surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you
like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboim?
My heart is turned over within Me, All My
compassions are kindled.*
Hosea 11:8

God does all that is necessary to rescue us, while respecting our right to accept it, while waiting on our choice to return for His help. It takes a strong father to hold back his desire to protect in order to allow the child to grow, and to receive help with full integrity. God is the one Father who can do this right. In Him we see the character of a true father, a father who loves completely and also keeps His eternal purpose intact.

Because He is a Father who knows our need, a Mother who shares our suffering.

Fathering flows out of God with full integrity. The fathering and mothering which any of us do is corrupted by our weakness and sin. We harm our children almost as much as we build them up, but God's way is always upbuilding, always loving, always true to Himself as well as our need. When we let Him relate to us as the Father He is, we feel His love. When we step out of the confusion and hurt we feel from the failure of our own mothers and fathers, and accept God's treatment of us in the way He describes it in the Bible and portrays it in Jesus, then we will feel His strong love. And we will find our hearts burning with the intensity of that love.

3

To Know the Father, Meet the Son

There is a burning cry in each of our hearts that says, “I wish I could *really* know my father.” It is in the cry of the child waiting to nestle into the safety of her father’s chest. It is in the yearning of the youth to please his daddy. It is in the questioning of the teen searching for direction. It is in the tentative offerings of the young adult to see if his father approves of his choices. It remains in the mature adult’s longing for meaningful conversation with her father.

Even where the father is absent or cruel this cry burrows into a hidden recess of the soul. Then the questions change to, “Why is my father like this? Who would he be if he didn’t drink, or rage, or work so much, etc.? What would it be like to have a father who really cared about me?” These questions from a soul in pain still come from the desire to know his/her father, to know the man he *could* be.

This cry to know my father is the reaching out of my love for him seeking a bond with his love for me. (I am speaking about the desire to bond with father because of the theme of this book. We also have a desire to bond with our mother’s love, but I believe, because we are carried in our mother’s womb,

live next to her heart for our first months of life, and are suckled on her breasts from our first moments in the world, that the reach for this bond of love is much different.) The need to claim this bond with our father is so strong because it fulfills a basic human relationship, and because it reflects the desire to know Father God. We want to know the one who breathed into our spirit the breath that gave us life (Gen. 2:7). We want to return to the open, strong relationship which the first son of God, Adam, had with the Father.

We want to know God as a Father.

How? How can we come to a credible knowledge of God as Father when the model of father which we know is so flawed? The best fathers show love and support, but they come far short of the powerful love which Father God wants us to see. The worst fathers threaten to destroy even our desire to know a Father God. Fathers who try to love well, fail, and try again, leave us uncertain whether we can trust Father God to be the consistent One we need. For each person, the journey to know God goes through the jungle of fear about a father and the twisted expressions of a father which he/she experienced.

How can we know the Father? Meet the Son. When God wanted to reveal Himself as a Father, He sent His Son.

If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him. Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father'?" John 14:7-9

It is a son, a daughter, who shows what their father is like. The daughter, the son, who has absorbed the character of their father and lives it through their own life are the ones who demonstrate that theirs is a father who can be trusted, is one another person can relate to, is one who can be known. Jesus is the Son who makes the Father known.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

John 1:18 (NIV)

It is the life of a faithful son, of a responsive daughter, which makes clear the heart of a father. This is because the ways of a father, viewed in isolation, can be misunderstood.

A father (and a mother too, frequently) is responsible for the support of the whole family, so he must often spend attention, hours, and energy away from the family itself. This can look like neglect, but the child who learns the meaning of her father's work and the love he is acting in doing it will trust his time away from home and be at rest while he is gone. It is the trusting child who reveals the goodness in the father's heart.

A father must carry the long perspective, and so will sometimes withhold from immediate needs so there is resource for future needs. It is the father who must preserve the seed corn, even when his children are hungry, so that there will be a crop next year. This can seem cruel at the moment, but the child who believes his father's promise has hope that by going hungry now the family will have food next year. It is the hopeful child who attests to the consistency of the father's decisions.

A father is to protect his children, so he must sometimes block relationships they choose or keep them out of activities they

would like. This can look restrictive and punishing, but the child who accepts it in confidence that father does know best will welcome the restrictions and accept other activities. It is the contented child who demonstrates the father's commitment to security.

When the directions and actions of a father are seen in the full light of a son or daughter living them, their effect can be received and the father honored and trusted. However, a daughter or son who does not live out the intentions of their father genuinely will leave others uncertain about their father.

Israel was called to be a son, to demonstrate to the nations what kind of Father God is.

When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son. The more they called them, The more they went from them; They kept sacrificing to the Baals And burning incense to idols. Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms; But they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love, And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws; And I bent down and fed them.

Hosea 11:1-4

But Israel did not live as a true son. When their provisions of water, bread, and meat ran out, the people questioned God's goodness and His care in leading them out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land. When enemies threatened them they did not wait for His way of deliverance, but turned to weapons and alliances of their own choosing. When He called them into His presence so that the people would hear His commands and receive them from His own mouth, they let fear keep them away and put their trust in a man instead.

God was treating the people of Israel with fatherly kindness,

*in the wilderness where you saw how the
LORD your God carried you, just as a man
carries his son, in all the way which you have
walked, until you came to this place. Deut.
1:31*

Yet, they could not receive His care as trusting children. Instead they let fear and suspicion blind them to His love and wisdom. As a result, the nation did not reveal the true character of God, the character which God was trying to show through its life and destiny. By their complaining and rebellion they demonstrated God's judgment more than His provision.

I must add that the church likewise has proven a poor son. The church has not kept the directives of the Father in purity. The church has not acted in His character consistently. The church has compromised the Father's ways by adding ways learned from other sources. Like Israel in the Old Testament period, the church of the new covenant period has failed to show the character of Father God as He is. From neither social representation, the nation Israel or the church, will we gain a complete picture of God as Father.

In Jesus the Son we do. Jesus is the one True Son of Father God. It is in Jesus that we see what the Father is like. It is from Jesus' responses in life that we learn the trustworthy ways of Father God.

Jesus accepted the humiliation of his role as a servant without complaining (Phil. 2:6-8), showing the trust that His Father did know the way which was best for him. Jesus always sought His Father's direction (John 8:28), demonstrating confidence in the Father's good will. Jesus trusted his future, his destiny, in

the Father's hands even in the face of betrayal, abandonment, and suffering, proving that the Father is reliable, even when appearances indicate otherwise. Jesus did not let anything break His love for the Father – not temptation, opposition, being misunderstood, loneliness, difficulties, rejection. His unwavering love of the Father makes it clear that love is the very nature of the Father. The Father of Jesus is the Father we can trust completely.

It is the Son who most openly and effectively reveals God the Father. The experience of poor fathers we have had need not block us from knowing the kind of Father which God is. He is vividly portrayed as the Father of Jesus Christ. To know Jesus is to know the Father (John 14:9).

We can know God as Father by knowing Jesus. Jesus revealed the truth about God the Father in His words, His love for persons, and His life of trusting submission. Because of Jesus, I trust God as a good, consistent, trustworthy Father. Because of Jesus you can trust that God is a good Father, always acting in love, no matter what kind of natural father you had.

There is another manifestation of a son, of a daughter, which reveals the true character of God the Father: your own desire to be a sincere daughter or son. The very cry within you to know your father is a witness to the goodness of Father God. The desire within you to know your father deeply is there because you expect him to be good. The kind of father you *want* to know, the qualities of the father you *want* to have, are those of God Himself. The poor or abusive behavior of our natural fathers does not obliterate our expectation of what a father should be. Why? Because we have a Father who *does* fulfill these expectations. It is what we *want* from our father that tells us what our heavenly Father is waiting to give.

The power of the cry to know your father, even in the face of his broken lifestyle and hurtful behaviors, is testimony to how strong is the hope that there lives a Father worthy of knowing. The very longing within you to have a good, fulfilling relationship with your natural father is a trust in your soul that the True Father will be this for you.

It is yourself as a son, as a daughter, who reveals God as a Father. It is your desire to be a true, honorable, responsive daughter, son, to a father which tells you that God's Father heart is trustworthy. It is your desperate longing to have a father who is worth imitating, worth being proud of, worth introducing to all who know you, which describes what you expect Father God to be like.

And He is. God is the Father Jesus reveals. God is the Father you want. It is the true Father character of God which put the cry to know a father in your heart. The burning is from Him. Let the desire burn.

*Jesu, Joy of man's desiring, Holy wisdom,
Love most bright.
Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring
soar to uncreated Light.
Word of God our flesh that fashioned
with the fire of life impassioned.
Striving still to Truth unknown,
soaring, dying round Thy throne.*

R. Bridges/J.S. Bach

4

Discovering Love

Until I felt the fire of the Father's fierce love in my own soul, reading Song of Songs (also called Song of Solomon, in some Bibles) always left me unsettled. The way the dialogue jumped back and forth disrupted my secure form of logical study. The sensual images popping up evoked feelings which I tried to deny in a relationship with God (and with persons, I must admit). The desire which the Lover and the Beloved express for each other keeps getting thwarted, and this just frustrated me. The disappointment of the ending left me flat and questioning what the story was doing in the Bible.

Now, Song of Songs is a favorite read of mine. I read it with joy and satisfaction. I let my feelings ride the images into hope. I let my desires enter into the Beloved's desires and yearn with her for consummation. I close it no longer with a sense of disappointment, but of excitement – that fulfillment of such love is near, very near, for me!

I know many wonderful interpretations of Song of Songs have been written, some with detailed descriptions of the imagery. But, what helps me is to read it like a play which I am viewing in a theater.

The curtain opens upon the Beloved singing her longing for her Lover.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth

*for your love is more delightful than wine.
Take me away with you, let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers.*
1:2,4

Then she muses on her own desirability, verses 5 to 7, wondering if the one she seeks so strongly will acknowledge her. We see her alone on center stage, and we immediately feel her hope and her fear. The Chorus off to the side, voices some of our thoughts:

*We rejoice and delight in you:
We will praise your love more than wine.*

*If you do not know, most beautiful of women,
Follow the tracks of the sheep.*
1:4,8

The Lover speaks, but from where? We cannot see him, but he sees her:

*I liken you, my darling, to a mare
harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh.
Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,
Your neck with strings of pearls.
How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!*
1:9,11,12

Back and forth the dialogue goes. Sometimes the lovers find one another and speak heart to heart. Other times they reflect in reverie on the loveliness of the other and the prospect of being together.

But the moments they are together on stage are fleeting. We are drawn into their desire, and become ourselves frustrated

when their movements turn them aside and out of each other's sight.

And it gets more painful. The Beloved searches the stage for her Lover. She finds him, and they speak sweetly, but suddenly he disappears. They sing to one another from different parts of the scene, and we yearn for them to claim the joy they seek in each other's arms.

The Lover comes secretly to the Beloved when she is in her chamber, but by the time she responds to his whispers, he is gone. When she goes out to seek him this time, she is buffeted by the watchmen, and we groan at her delay and suffer the pain of her abuse.

Again we see them pouring out their desires, hear them picture the love they feel, but lifting their voices to the sky, not one another. Yet, their movements bring them together, only to have the chorus get in the way, and they lose one another. This has become frustrating to us, the audience.

In the finale, we hear each one voice their desire.

Lover:

*You who dwell in the gardens
With friends in attendance,
Let me hear your voice.*

Beloved:

*Come away, my lover,
And be like a gazelle
Or like a young stag
On the spice-laden mountains.*

8:13,14

But they sing from different parts of the set. They have not come together. The curtain falls, and we feel the burning of desire – their desire to be together; our desire to see love fulfilled. We experience the pain of passion trapped within, theirs and our own.

Now, continue the theater image. You leave the hall in these strong emotions. You come out into the lobby, and you see the writer of the play standing there. Your reactions are mixed, but still you want to thank him for the play, so you approach hesitantly. As you come close and look into his face, you find him gazing at you, and in his eyes you realize the point of the play: this is the way He feels about you! The unfulfilled desire expressed in the lovers on stage, is His own heart toward you, and yours toward Him.

What joy! What discovery! I am loved. I am desired. I am sought after. I have a Lover who is wooing me. I have a strong desire to come to Him. I have a love which must be fulfilled.

It was not until I accepted my own yearning for love that I read Song of Songs in this way. It was when I recognized that there is in me a passionate desire to give love that let me feel the intensity in the story. It was by admitting my need for the Father's love and trusting that I am in it which made room in my understanding for the message of Song of Songs. It was risking expressing my need for love and exposing myself in offering love which freed me to enjoy the adventures of the Lover and the Beloved.

I want to help you find the burning in your heart. I want to provoke you to feel the heat of love's desire in your soul. I want to lead you to discover the altar within on which the fire of your love merges with the fire of God the Father's love. I want to show something of the intense love the Father has for

you, what I call His fierce love, in which your own love for Him burns more fervently. I want to set you on the path of seeking that “correspondence of love between God and the Soul” which Catherine of Genoa found to be God’s desire toward us.

In so acting, God so transforms the soul in Him that it knows nothing other than God; and He continues to draw it up into His fiery love until He restores it to that pure state from which it first issued. As it is being drawn upwards, the soul feels itself melting in the fire of that love of its sweet God, for He will not cease until He has brought the soul to its perfection.¹

My own journey on this path has shown me elements of God’s character as Father which I had not seen before. It has pulled open my own heart and shown me depths of my love and desire which had been hidden from me. It has been exciting so far, and yet it is only the beginning of a quest which will carry me, and you, through all Eternity.

¹ Catherine of Genoa, op.cit.,78-79.

5

The Father's Jealous Love

The prophet Hosea had a heart-wrenching assignment. It was not unusual for prophets of the Old Testament to be told by God to show His attitude toward the people by some dramatic act. Jeremiah was to wear a linen belt, then bury it, only to retrieve it after it was spoiled (Jer. 3:1-11). This was to show how God intended to spoil Judah's pride. Ezekiel was told to lie on his side for 430 days before a clay sketch of Jerusalem to show how long God had put up with the sins of Israel and of Judah (one day for each year) (Ezk. 4). These instructions certainly challenged the prophets' obedience, but they were single events which were performed and then left behind. Hosea's assignment was to enter into a relationship, a life-long relationship, which tested him repeatedly. He was instructed by God to marry a woman who was a prostitute, and whose affections would continue to turn to other lovers.

This lived parable was to demonstrate the unfaithfulness of Israel – and of all who promise to love God, but it also became a way for God to portray His persevering love for His chosen one. The unfaithful wife following her own pleasures cannot dilute her Husband's love. The one to whom God has made His commitment of love cannot escape it, even by going after other lovers. By asking Hosea to take back his errant wife, God was revealing His resolve of love to hold onto the bond with those He calls unto Himself. This shows the security we

have, that we cannot take ourselves outside the limits of His love.

God does not stop with this picture of Himself as a patient, accepting husband, however. He leaps into the language of a jealous lover.

“Contend with your mother, contend, For she is not my wife, and I am not her husband; And let her put away her harlotry from her face, And her adultery from between her breasts, Lest I strip her naked And expose her as on the day when she was born. I will also make her like a wilderness, Make her like desert land, And slay her with thirst. Also, I will have no compassion on her children, Because they are children of harlotry. For their mother has played the harlot; She who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, Who give me my bread and my water, My wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.' Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, And I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; And she will seek them, but will not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my first husband, For it was better for me then than now!' For she does not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine, and the oil, And lavished on her silver and gold, Which they used for Baal. Therefore, I will take back My grain at harvest time And My new wine in its season. I will also take away My wool and My flax Given to cover her nakedness. And then I will uncover her

lewdness In the sight of her lovers, And no one will rescue her out of My hand. I will also put an end to all her gaiety, Her feasts, her new moons, her sabbaths, And all her festal assemblies. And I will destroy her vines and fig trees, Of which she said, 'These are my wages Which my lovers have given me.' And I will make them a forest, And the beasts of the field will devour them. And I will punish her for the days of the Baals When she used to offer sacrifices to them And adorn herself with her earrings and jewelry, And follow her lovers, so that she forgot Me," declares the LORD. Hosea 2: 2-13

Whenever we see a love story like this developed by poet or playwright, we are shown the double motives that always work in human hearts. The desire to have the exclusive love of another is always tainted with the compulsion to possess the person. The jealousy of love which we encounter in our natural experience, whether on stage or in life, always feels somewhat selfish and controlling to us. So, we are startled to read God's love for His bride in such terms as these.

Yet, God, who is Love, loves with such purity that for Him to have His beloved's full and undivided affection is also to give her the only way to freedom and full possession of herself. This truth is demonstrated throughout the Bible. From the announcement of the Law by Moses to the invitation to "follow me" of Jesus to the instructions to be servant of all in Paul's letters, the message is that submission is the way to freedom. Obedience to God's higher way of love brings full personal identity.

So, we must read this love story with fresh eyes. We can let ourselves trust the integrity of the Bridegroom's motives and

take our role as the bride without fear of our identity being crushed. In truth, it is the burning love of the Bridegroom which assaults the fortress of our distorted identity and delivers us into freedom.

The severity of God's attack sounds harsh to our ears. It seems cruel that He would expose nakedness and take away possessions. "How can this be love?" we ask. Yet, His love is a flame which burns cleanly, a fire which consumes only what is corrupted and impure in the soul it claims (see I Peter 1:3-7)

The reaction of our natural being to God's intensive fire is to try and ward it off. We try to shield our conscience from the heat. We turn our face from the flames. We minimize our weaknesses, deny our faults, protect our systems of self-justification. We try to pull away from the fire.

But the message of Hosea is: it's love; the fire is His love. The flames are what purify us to enjoy His love. The burning is what sets us free to enter wholeheartedly into the embrace of His love. It is when we let the fire do its work that we learn the truth, the truth about our own value and the truth of His unremitting love.

How do we keep our souls in the fire instead of pulling out? First, let me admit that I pull out regularly. Even though I have accepted that the fire of the Father's love is only for my good, I still have that tendency to jerk back from the flame, to put up a screen against the heat. I know that it is worth it to stay in the fire, but doing so still challenges the reactions I have learned.

We keep our souls in the fire by offering our dreams to it. The fire of God's love clarifies our desires. A dream can be tested in this flame. When you trust that our Divine Lover does not want to destroy your joy but to fulfill it, you can lift a desire of your heart into His love and let this reveal what is selfish and

what is the pure crystal of God's own intention for you. A desire for a deep friendship, or a wife, or a husband, can be tested in His love, to learn what in it is sincere need for human expression of that love and what is fear that you will not experience His love. A dream for success in a venture or for effectiveness in an area of service can be offered to His love, to know what is His call to follow and what is your need to produce something in order to feel worthy. A desire for some special property or the home of your dreams can be shared with Him to feel what is His loving provision and what is your fantasy

Little desires, like a day of quiet to yourself, medium desires, like a new career opportunity, and big desires, like a vision to see your testimony change a nation, when tested in the fire of God's love, will come back to you as His gift which you can then hold in trust. Without this testing, we tend to cling to our desires in fear that they will be taken from us if we ask God about them. His fire is intense, and it will take away that which is self-serving in our desires. But, I would rather pursue a desire which I know He has blessed than hold out for one which I suspect is tainted.

We stay in the fire by submitting our thoughts to the Father. The heat of God's love-fire proves our reasons for action. Our fertile minds generate many justifications for positions we hold and actions we take. Some of these are solid reasons, based on fidelity to God; others are spurious, developed as supports for what we want or feel the need to maintain. When we expose these to the heat of God's demanding love, what is in concert with His ways remains, and what is held up by only the web of our own thoughts melts away.

I present my reasons to God in dialogue prayer, recording in my journal both my thoughts and what I hear from Him. These pages reveal in rather short order what is of self and what fits

with God's own plans. I also offer my reasons to colleagues whom I have invited to hold me close to God's love and purpose. I can feel the heat of His love in their response. I can also sense when the heat is from their own desires or fears. Staying with these two dialogues is a way of remaining close to the fire. There is heat in the exchanges, and this heat is God's earnest love testing my reasons and motives. Even when the heat flares out from a conflict of my self-issues with those of my colleagues, God uses this to reveal my heart. It is His love searching me out, and His love reaches to the decisive points in my mind and will.

Facing squarely our sin is a way to stay in the fire of the Bridegroom's love. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (John 16:8), using our conscience, the standard of the Bible, challenge by those near us, and the light of His revelation. But what we first want to confess as sin, assuming that we are ready to confess and receive freedom through forgiveness, may be more a symptom than the sin of our soul. It is the fire of God, burning fiercely in our hearts, which pulls us down to motives.

When Jesus said that cursing is as serious as murder, lust as devastating as adultery (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28), he taught us that it is in the heart-motive that sin lies. We are pretty well defended against seeing these hidden motives, and our quick confession of symptoms is often part of that defense. With God's fire of love burning within, we feel the puff of this self-deception, and can dare to choose to wait, watching for what begins to glow in the center of our heart. This, then, is what we confess. Since His love is seeking to eradicate all deception and falsehood, simplifying us to a pure love of Himself, we can trust Him to identify and cleanse all unrighteousness (I John 1:9) erupting into sin.

We keep our souls in the fire of God's love when we put into it what is spoken to us by others. From creation, God made us dependent on community: "It is not good for the man to be alone," Genesis 2:18. We will prosper with wise counsel (Prov. 15:22). Yet, the words of other persons are always colored by their own needs and perceptions. We will know with more certainty what we are to take unto ourselves if we set these words into the fire of God's love for us and look at them there. Do the colors of the words blend with the fire, do they add sparkle, or are they revealed as quick burning straw? This means listening honestly to those who speak to us, and holding their words courageously before the Bridegroom. It is His interpretation and application of the words which will then accomplish His work of shaping us as a bride pure and without blemish (Eph. 5:).

Paul was counseled not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-14), but the fire of God's love for Paul's own people the Jews drove him on. The counsel told Paul what he would face, but since this matched the color of persecution which Paul already saw (Acts 20:22-24), he did not take the word as direction not to go.

I regularly ask counsel of those near me. Often it blends beautifully with the love in my heart and my desire to follow it. Sometimes the counsel seems contrary, and I must hold it separate for further clarification or confirmation. Sometimes, the sound of the words I receive crackling in the fire of my heart shows the counsel to be foreign, to be coming from the person's own need, and I respectfully discard them.

We stay in the fire of His love, the fire which is consuming the dross of our souls, by communicating with Him, by waiting for His revelation and clarification, by taking to Him our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, even when we are fearful of the response – especially when we are fearful of the response. We do so in prayer, in worship, in reading, in silence. We do so alone, and we do so with trusted peers. We do so as we yield to the heat of His love drawing on the heat of our own love, which we feel when we pause to sense it. We do this in spite of hesitation we experience, and knowing the pain which accompanies the burning of these things. It is this determination to hold our selves before Him which keeps our souls in the fire, and yields the harvest of righteousness (Heb. 12:11)

Reading the first half of Hosea 2 we see the jealous passion of God, the Holy Bridegroom. We feel the flame searing away our theatrical garments and our cosmetic treasures which we wear in our attachment to other lovers.. Exposed and naked we want to run, but in this moment of raw vulnerability we hear His tender voice.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, Bring her into the wilderness, And speak kindly to her. Then I will give her her vineyards from there, And the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. And it will come about in that day," declares the LORD, "That you will call Me Ishi And will no longer call Me Baali. For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, So that they will be mentioned by their names no more. In that day I will also make a covenant for them With the beasts of the field, The birds of the sky, And the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the

sword, and war from the land, And will make them lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD. And it will come about in that day that I will respond," declares the LORD. I will respond to the heavens, and they will respond to the earth, And the earth will respond to the grain, to the new wine, and to the oil, And they will respond to Jezreel. And I will sow her for Myself in the land. I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, And I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they will say, 'Thou art my God!'"

Hosea 2:14-23

The jealous Bridegroom is revealed as the Divine Lover. He calls us, calls me, calls you, to come close to Him. He is wooing us, each of us, into the sweetness of His tender love.

This is the purpose of His fiery passion. It is not just that He wants to strip and purify us, it is that He wants to free us from all distractions and all that compels our attention so we will hear His quiet, tender voice.

*Then, O Lord, I will wait for you with hunger
and thirst, eagerness and delight
Until that joyful hour when the chosen words
flow from Your lips.
Only the soul that cuts itself off the world to
listen to the words of Your mouth will hear
them.
Such a soul alone is able to receive the Fount
of Love.*

Mechthild of Magdeburg

When our soul has been cut off from all that absorbed its desires, all that tempted its needs, we look up and see the face of our Lover wooing us with His eyes. In the silence left when our false suitors are sent away, our ears hear His tender words of love. When our arms are no longer filled with the fruits we have furtively gathered ourselves, we can receive the embrace of our true Love. When our hands are empty of the vain things we have grasped to soothe the pain of our passion, we can take hold of the hand He offers, to lift us up, and to walk us beside Him in joy.

God, who is humble enough to reveal Himself as a vulnerable baby, is also bold enough to show Himself as an eager suitor. He unabashedly uses the language of a man wooing a woman into intimate communion (here and in Song of Songs) to describe His desire for union with His people, with us, with you.

A man in such passion will not speak his most endearing words while his intended is preoccupied with other things. He will not reveal the desire of his heart to her while she is looking at a departing “friend”. He will not caress her tenderly while she is trussing up garments she received from another suitor. He will not even coax her attention while he sees that her thoughts drift

toward an old relationship. He wants her all to himself, and he wants her whole attention.

Jesus is the man desiring to show such love to His bride, to us. Jesus is the one waiting to speak tender words to your heart. Jesus is the one who wants to fulfill your desire for love. And He wants you to receive Him fully, completely separated from all distractions.

The possibility of such intimacy with Jesus seems unreal. It seems too far away to dare to hope to enter. It is this perception which turns us toward the other lovers of materialism, substitute relationships, addictions, busyness, pursuit of success, or the safety of a low expectation of being loved. Having neither the experience nor the faith-understanding to expect such love from Jesus, we divert to lesser inducements and pretend to be satisfied.

But Jesus is not satisfied. He wants to share Himself with us in intimacy and to receive our full attention. Words of love burn in His heart, waiting to be shared. Gestures of tender affection form in His being, longing to reach out to us. Sometimes these are expressed in material ways and in words heard in our spirits. Sometimes they are communicated into the still center of our hearts as only a sense of being loved deeply. In order to receive either, we need to be drawn away from the other things which capture our attention.

When the possibility of intense, personal intimacy with Jesus becomes apparent, we may also flee in fear. Intimacy is the most precious thing we can experience. It is also the most threatening. When another is open to receive us in intimacy, she/he wants to receive the whole person we are. We are made open ourselves in response, and this is uncomfortable. We experience it as risk, and part of us wants to run away, while part of us wants to run in. It is the same with Jesus. When we

start to believe that He desires to know and receive the raw person we are, we feel both longing and fear. If we give into the fear, we will yield only a part of ourselves to Him. The rest of ourselves we will hide in relationships – whether with an object, a person, a fantasy, or an activity – which we can control.

Jesus pursues us into these alternate relationships. His jealous desire for us has no room for competitors. He wants no one else listening when He speaks the sweetness of His love to each of us. He wants no one watching when He draws us close in His arms. He wants each of us alone with Himself.

His pursuit is that of a passionate lover, the one who is Love personified. When He captures us in His love, we are not imprisoned, but set truly free. We are free to receive His love, and we are loosed to pour forth unto Him all the love within us. This is the joyful discovery of the desert experience, where, stripped of all our defenses and substitutions, we accept the pure love of our Pursuer, and find the happiness we have been seeking.

6

Never Abandoned

In the back corner of my father's shop was an old forge. He used the forge to form sharp edges on plow blades and to bend and shape the iron bars which he used in making decorative railings. When he was using the forge the fire would burn all day. Sometimes he would leave it for a while to attend to a customer or work on another project. Then the flame would die down, leaving only the glowing embers of coal. When he returned to the forge to continue his work, he would pump the bellows, forcing air into the center of the embers, and the flame would burst up with intensity. Then he could plunge in the piece of iron he wanted to shape.

God sometimes leaves the fire of our heart's love. In God's working, it is not because He has other things to attend to that He leaves us alone for a time. No, all His ways are perfect (Ps.18:30), and all He does is from love (Ps. 25:10). When God removes Himself from blowing the breath which sustains our inner fire of love, He is doing so to reveal something about the fire. We may feel the flames of our heart die down, feel the heat cool, but this offers an opportunity for a stronger intensity to emerge in the compacted embers of our love.

If you have walked in the Christian faith for very long you have experienced the sense of being abandoned by God. It may have come in the loss of someone near to you, or in the pressure of making a critical decision, or in the dryness when worship no longer quenches the thirst of your soul. It may have come slow and subtly or suddenly and strong. You may

have identified it with the cry, “Where are you, God?” or you may have pined, “What’s wrong with me?” However it came, whether once, many times, or almost continually, however you describe it, it is a clear consciousness that God is not as close as you need Him to be.

How does this happen? When do we encounter the absence of the One who promises to “be with you always” (Matt. 28:20)?

It happens when God does not meet us with His presence in a spiritual activity which has brought us unto Him before. Worship, which lifted your spirit to touch heaven, leaves you flat. You feel only the floor under your feet. Prayer, in which you heard God’s gracious acceptance of your pleas and His promise to care for your needs, becomes an exercise in repetition. The service for His Kingdom which satisfied your soul no longer seems real and significant. When this happens, we usually ask what is wrong with us, but sometimes the movement is God, not us.

God withdraws from us by not bringing the comfort which we need when we are in the midst of a deep sorrow. Yes, God promises to be our comfort (Isa. 51:12), and this is the norm for His children. Yet, there are times of loss when we do not experience the firm support of His consolation in the way we need it. He seems indifferent to our tears, cold to our emptiness. The nearness in which we have rested is gone, and we feel abandoned.

God holds back by not meeting us with a deeper experience of Himself when we seek it. As we go on in the Christian walk we come upon new ways of encountering God: forms of worship we have not practiced, depths of teaching we have not heard, disciplines of holiness which invite richer communion with Him, opportunities for service which call us to act with bolder faith in His provision. We step into these, and we

experience growth in ourselves. We see a more vivid revelation of God. We rejoice, and look forward to the next chance. Then, we take such a step, at great risk to some aspect of our situation or relationships, and, nothing. There is no new revelation, no thrilling connection, no closer fellowship. It is as we have stepped forward and fallen off a cliff. We reached for God's hand, and found no one.

God deserts us by letting the enterprise in which we invested ourselves collapse. You have built a means of provision for your life, your family, maybe one from which you are able to give generously to community or Christian work. Something happens, and it falls apart. You have dedicated yourself to a service of the community or Kingdom which is doing much good. Dissension arises and the organization is divided and destroyed. You prepare yourself for a career or mission, eager to fulfill your own sense of identity and to do good for others. An accident or illness hit and you are disabled from going on with it. You enter into these ventures with the leading of the Lord, yet He seems to desert you before it is accomplished.

God hides Himself by not protecting us from attacks. We travel on the journey of faith relying on His promise to be our defender (Ps. 18:2-3), our fortress (Ps. 59:16). Yet, there are times when attacks come and do reach us. Slander does ruin our reputation. Lies do undermine relationships. Persecution does take possessions, even life. We know that God has the power to defend us, and the knowledge that we are being attacked, so it must be that He is ignoring our plight. He has left us, just when we need Him.

I leave these descriptions in raw form because these are the ways we experience them. In incidents like these, and many other kinds, our confidence in God's presence and support is shaken. We count on Him, and do not receive what we need. Of course disobedience may take someone outside God's

provision or protection, but this is not always the reason. It is real that God Himself holds back. This is a time of proving the fuel in the fire of love.

We are tenders of our own fire of love. God the Holy Spirit stirs and cares for the fire in your soul, but your own attention is essential to how it burns. What of you and from you serves to intensify the fire within, especially when it seems that God has left you on your own? What follows is not an exhaustive study, but these are attitudes and efforts which I have found effective for stoking the fire in my heart.²

When I sense the cooling left by God's absence, I try to move into honesty about the hurt and need which this exposes. My initial feelings are usually frustration, anger, or despair, but these are symptoms of my hurt, not the wound itself. I ask, "What is it that I am missing? What was I expecting? What do I really want from God, or from the person, or from the situation?" If you have read my book, *Hearing the Voice of God*, you know that I do not ask these questions in isolation. I make them a dialogue with Father, Son, or Holy Spirit.

When I came under attack from people I had served for several years, and God abandoned me to their unjust judgments, I discovered that I had let my identity be formed by their approval. I had fueled the fire of my love for God with their praise and affirmation. It was not burning with my own inner assurance.

When I was betrayed by friends I trusted, and God let their words be used against me so that I was falsely judged, honesty showed me that I had let these relationships heat the fire of my love for God more than my direct passion for Him. I took the

² The classic presentation of this theme is by St. John of the Cross. His treatises are, "The Ascent of Mt. Carmel," "The Dark Night," and "The Spiritual Canticle."

pain which pierced me from these cracked relationships into my soul and let it add to the burning. I let my desire for Father God's love increase. This also freed me from holding onto their hurts and allowed me to forgive them and be restored in my own integrity.

Honesty, in this instance, is being honest with myself. It means testing each response my mind gives to see if it comes from familiar justifications, or from the genuine need I feel. It means waiting until my heart has had enough of accusing others, and ask the Holy Spirit to show me why it hurts me so. It means going back to these reflections later and evaluating them again. It means saying them to a trusted friend and asking him to tell me if I am being honest with myself. It is because God pulls away that I find myself forced into this place, and in it I find also that I want my fire to burn strong.

God's distancing of Himself leaves me feeling adrift, without certainty of my direction or confidence in my actions. At first this is like water sprinkled on the fire of my love, and it starts to fizzle. The response in me which brightens the fire again is to focus on what I am pursuing. The certainty I seek is not about directions, but of His love. My pursuit is to trust this, and receive it in all circumstances. I focus my heart away from the demand for guidance and onto how He *is* loving me in this instance. I determine to hold out for what He promises. Instead of succumbing to indifference, I focus more intently on the true Source of my hope, on the true Source of my fire.

The first time I had to leave a career and pursue another vocation, I did not get any clear guidance from God for many months. There were many days in which I felt frantic, both about my future and about our present need for finances. I sought God desperately for direction. He did not give me what I needed. Days and weeks would go by with no answer from Him to my questions. When I asked why, I heard that He

wanted me to feel His love for me apart from such provision, and that He wanted me to discover my love for Him that is deeper than thanks for them. The severity of His denial squeezed me into the center of my desire, and I found a more earnest love for Him there.

Loss always sets off a feeling that God has denied our need. We have welcomed a possession, or relationship, or situation, as His goodness to us. Then, when it is taken from us, we feel let down, and God is no longer the near, caring Father we knew. Loss yanks a large log from the fire of our love, and the flame quickly dies down. However, if I let go of my hold on this log, if I consciously yield into God's hand what He is pulling out of my heart, a warm wind is drawn into the void, and my fire of love continues to burn.

When for the second time I lost a career, I knew clearly that Father God was taking it from me. He told me directly and through my most trusted friends that He wanted me out of this career, even though it was effective for His Kingdom. However, He left me "high and dry" about a new career. He gave me no new direction, and I did not know where to turn. I tried, briefly, to hang onto part of my old position, but this shielded me from the Father's love and cooled my own. When I gave it up to Him with open hand, I felt the strength of His love – even without the support of a new direction, and I found my love deepen.

In the time of God's abandonment, adopt a cycle of solitude and fellowship. When you feel that God is not with you, get together with people who are experiencing His presence. Place your cold fire alongside the fires of others, and let their heat sustain your coals. The "dark night of the soul," as John of the Cross has named it, does not last forever. It is a season in which God withdraws in order that your own fire would

intensify. Take yourself into the company of believers so that the light of their faith illumines your way.

However, step away into solitude also. The Father has let you go so that you will recognize some things about yourself. He has drawn aside so that you will look into the center of your fire of love and see what will make it flare up. These truths are most commonly discovered alone. By silent waiting we allow our souls to hear what they miss in busy times. Entering into the experience of abandonment turns us toward our desperate need for His love.

God withdraws from us so that we will experience the empty place, the dry desert. This we must do alone. It is alone that we know the intensity of our own fire, apart from that of others. It is in the silence of solitude that we can hear the cry of our own hunger. It is in the bareness of the desert that we look at ourselves to see what is there, and what is lacking. It is also there that we stoke the fire of our love from within ourselves. What seems like a flickering flame in the busy places of life becomes a bright torch in the deep darkness of the desert. Seeing this strong gleam in your soul brings courage to trust it when you return to activity.

*I love thee, Lord, for the very greed of love –
Not of the precious streams that towards me move,
But of the indwelling, outgoing, fountain store.
Than mine, oh, many an ignorant heart loves more!
Therefore the more, with Mary at thy feet,
I must sit worshipping – that, in my core,
Thy words may fan to a flame the low primeval heat.*

George MacDonald, *Diary of An Old Soul*

7

The Anger of Love

The fire of the Father's love is not a candle. It is not a gentle flickering accent to lend a sense of peace to the distressed room of our life. It is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29, Deut. 4:24). The intensity of the Father's love for us is painfully hot, at times. Looking into the center of His fire of love we sometimes see coals burning an angry red.

Anger from anyone used to intimidate me. I would get quiet and look for a way to escape the heat of their anger. The anger of those closest to me was the hardest to bear, for I felt their emotions were destroying what is good in our relationship. So, I was insulated against recognizing anger from Father God. I could enjoy God's care and provision, His instruction and guidance, even His gentle discipline. But, I ignored the subject of His anger, both in my study of the Bible and in my personal encounter with Him.

Until now. Until entering this quest to know His love and release my own. Until rejecting all forms of defense against His ways and daring to accept His love in all its facets. So, no longer can I deny His love through anger.

That is what it is: love through anger. God's love burns with anger, anger against every obstruction to the strong flow of love between Himself and His creation. Whether that

obstruction be in my heart or mind, in our tradition or pride, in social structures or nationalism's prejudices, His anger flares out against it, seeking to consume it to ashes.

I hid from anger because I felt it as hate. I registered only its destructive edge, and equated this to hatred, so I ran from it. This is, I believe, our common perception of anger: that it is a manifestation of hate. And this is right, on the one edge of its sword. Righteous anger is an expression of hatred toward that which is blocking love, toward that which is destroying the person loved, toward that which is confining the life of the one loved. Anger is love's hatred of evil.

In this common perception, we feel rejection from this hatred, and so deny that it could be love. Now, my enemies are indeed rejecting me in their anger, but not the ones who love me. They are not pushing me away when they are angry. Now I understand that they are, in fact, trying to pull me closer, to drag me across the obstacle of my false value or behavior, so we can come together in our love.

Now I can accept the heat of another's anger and believe the love which it demonstrates. Now I can admit Father God's anger and welcome its work in my soul. For, God's anger is part of His burning love.

Theologians define God's anger as His commitment to His holiness; His determination to uphold His character against all misrepresentation. This is accurate, but it keeps God's anger safely distant from us, so that we do not experience our own feelings in the heat of His anger. The language of the Bible is not so objective.

*For the LORD your God in the midst of you is
a jealous God; otherwise the anger of the
LORD your God will be kindled against you,*

and He will wipe you off the face of the earth.
Deut. 6:15

When you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, and go and serve other gods, and bow down to them, then the anger of the LORD will burn against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land which He has given you.
Josh. 23:16

Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart." Ex. 4:14

The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back, Until He has performed, and until He has accomplished The intent of His heart; In the latter days you will understand this. Jer. 30:24

"Therefore, wait for Me," declares the LORD, "For the day when I rise up to the prey. Indeed, My decision is to gather nations, To assemble kingdoms, To pour out on them My indignation, All My burning anger; For all the earth will be devoured By the fire of My zeal." Zep. 3:8

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known

about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. Rom 1:18-19

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; Eph. 5:6-7

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come, Col. 3:5-6

God's anger is His love. In order to enter into the intensity of the Father's love for us, we must stand boldly on the coals of this description of love and call it anger. We must put our face closer to the heat of His desire for us and look into the fury of it. We cannot hide behind our definition of love, from which anger and hatred are excised, and deny the fervor of God's love which is free to come forth as anger. We must let the reality of biblical revelation determine our understanding of love, not the sentimentality of our daydreams.

The love of God which burns as anger is *against* everything in a person or people which obstructs His love (Rom 1:18-21).

He is angry at idolatry, which steals the affection and trust of people from Himself.

He is angry at pride, which offers a pretend figure to His love instead of the true person one is.

He is angry at corruption, which abuses the value of the objects of His love.

He is angry at the ignoring of wrongs, which empties love of its meaning.

He is angry at indifference to His blessings, which spoils the experience of celebrating His goodness.

God's anger burns upon these barriers to a clear view of His love, exposing them by the fire which lights the spot and consuming them by the flames of destruction on it. This is His love coming against anything and everything which blocks or disrupts the flow of His love toward *all* its objects.

The love of the Father which burns is also *zeal for* His image being revealed in full beauty in His creation. Anger is only half described as hatred of evil. It is also passion for truth, beauty, justice. This is the aspect which I could not hear in the anger demonstrations of those who love me. The messages which they intended in their outburst was, "Dave, this is not who you really are! Come out of this false self and give me your true self, the one I love to know."

My true self bears the image of God. He wants this manifest cleanly, openly, boldly. Your character comes from the design of your Creator, and He is zealous to see it carried in truth and beauty. The qualities of peoples and nations are expressions of the mind of God which He yearns to see demonstrated clearly and lavishly (see Isa. 19:18-25). His enthusiasm to see each element of His creation in exuberant release of his/her/their/its true personality and character is His burning anger of love.

God's anger is not another word for His discipline. He does discipline us for correction of behavior (Heb. 12:6-11), but His anger has a wider focus than immediate behaviors or attitudes. It is directed at exposing and destroying the personality structures which hold us in bondage to the patterns of these attitudes and behaviors. Discipline can help us make

improvements in our conduct, but it takes something strong to expose the evil motives hidden in our sloppy behavior.

The same is true of the anger in those who love us (when it comes from their strength, and not out of their own sin pattern). My wife could be unhappy with my selfish behaviors and ask me to be more considerate. This was part of our general interaction to build one another up in righteousness. However, her anger was something more serious. It went after the deep-rooted self image in me which blocked me from living in strength and grace. She was not content with a few adjustments in how I acted, relative to this negative self image. She wanted to see the whole structure brought down.

When we read of God's anger burning against His people in the Old Testament, it is because a basic pattern of unbelief was making them blind and deaf to His ways, His will. The rising of His anger means, "This is the time to deal with it." In we humans, anger usually rises when we have "had enough." We get "fed up" with the resistance caused by the pattern in another, and we "blow up." I see this as a weak and distorted copy of God's holy determination that the moment has come when He can put on the pressure which will break the sinful structure.

There is an example of God's anger in 2 Samuel 24. There we read, "Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'" In God's plan, it was time to make a correction, to establish a clear precedence against trusting in the nation's own strength for defense. So, His anger pressured David to act contrary to His command (to not number the people). This allowed God to demonstrate the seriousness of His command, by a judgment of a plague, and to break the structure of pride in the army which tempted David, and the kings who followed. It

is love, because it brings the nation and its leaders into trust in God and the enjoyment of His loving protection.

I have encountered God's anger against a people myself. Twice, churches of which I was a part, have been confronted with God's anger. Both seemed to be healthy and had effective ministries. People were coming to faith and were growing in spiritual maturity. There was respect and support of one another and the leaders. Yet, in both cases, conflicts emerged which got worse and worse, in spite of responsible, loving attempts to resolve them. It was like people were being incited by outside forces to press their hurts and offenses and refuse reconciliation.

At the time, it all felt messy and inexplicable. The question in me, indeed in all of us, was, "How can this be happening?" Yet, the persistent digging from the upheavals exposed buried attitudes and hidden sins in many hearts. The battering which came in meetings and planned ways of dealing with the issues, exposed the weakness of our organizational structure. Things came apart – which needed to come apart.

Now I recognize this as the work of God's anger. He was not content with the level of ministry we demonstrated, even though it was good. He was not satisfied with the depth of love we showed, even though it was real. He wanted to confront each of us with our covered evil and to reveal the weakness of the corporate structure by which we operated.

Going through these experiences was painful and confusing. Emotions were raw and volatile. Reasoning, which seemed clear one week looked stupid the next. We all felt misunderstood, misrepresented, and under attack. We assumed that such a mess must be the work of satan. Yet, a few of us also sensed the hand of God. I remember remarking to one leader, after a series of circumstances made things worse

because of “miraculously” bad timing, “This is so bad that it has to be God.” Somewhere in my spirit I knew that God was Himself provoking these difficult events and encounters for purposes beyond our comprehension.

God’s anger feels bad in our emotions and our minds. It troubles our souls, pushing us out of the settled place we like to live. Yet, because it is God, our Father, we can discern in our spirits that it is for our good. There is a sense of assurance deep within even amidst the chaos of daily events. Even while we cry to God for relief and healing, we know that He is working by the very means which we want ended.

In the testimony of 2 Samuel 24, when the judgment is proposed through the prophet, David chooses that which is most simply in God’s hand, the plague, because he recognizes that it is God who is at work in the events. “Then David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man.’” (v.14) This is the assurance that God is in it which I am describing.

By assurance, I do not mean the casual, “It’s OK; God is in control” sentiment which thoughtless faith sometimes offers. I mean a deep conviction which holds onto trust when there is no current evidence for it. I mean the kind of faith which the psalmist had in Psalm 89, when he could praise God for what He did in the past and what He will do in the future, when in the present he felt that God had abandoned His people to the attack of enemies.

*But Thou hast cast off and rejected, Thou hast
been full of wrath against Thine anointed.
Thou hast spurned the covenant of Thy
servant; Thou hast profaned his crown in the
dust. .. Where are Thy former*

lovingkindnesses, O Lord, Which Thou didst swear to David in Thy faithfulness? ... Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen. Psalm 89: 38-39, 49, 52.

When you know that God is in the chaos, when you feel Him through the anger, when you remember that this is your Father who loves you, who wants only the pure and best for you, then you welcome it. You accept that this too is love. This is His fierce love.

How should we respond to God's anger? When you discern that the trouble may be from God rather than satan, how can you enter into it and receive the work which He intends? Here are the postures which I see demonstrated by men and women in the Bible.

Stand and face it, face Him. When God finally answered Job about Job's complaint of the way things had gone for him, God said,

Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.
Job. 40:7, NIV

It was as if God said, "Look at me, Job. Stand and face me. If you would understand what this is, you must look me in the face and hear me clearly." (Note. The beginning of Job's troubles, was not God's anger. Then, God was satisfied with Job's righteousness. However, in His confrontation with Job, after Job had attempted to justify himself, I sense God's anger.)

In the face of anger, the tendency in us is to hang our heads and drop our eyes. We drop into shame and try to let the force flow over us. However, if we are to hear the truth and let the power of the anger come against the hidden personality structures

within us, we must face anger upright and open-eyed. We must bear it without shame and listen without defensiveness. We can do this when the anger is in a person by looking full at the person and really listening. We can do this when the anger is from God expressed in circumstances, by going to Him directly in prayer, posing our question, "Why?", and waiting for His answer. For myself, when I have found the strength to do this, the moment of anger has turned into a healthy dialogue.

Take it in. When David realized that it was God's anger which he was facing, in 2 Samuel 24, he did not plead for escape, but asked that the judgment do its work quickly.

Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking down the people, and said, "Behold, it is I who have sinned, and it is I who have done wrong; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let Thy hand be against me and against my father's house." 2 Sam. 24:17

Again referring to our natural tendency, we want to protect ourselves from anger. We want to hold it at a distance and let it do as little to us as we can manage. However, this blocks the anger from doing its work. Let it hit you full and strong. Let it penetrate to where the evil is lodged in you. Do not make excuses. Do not justify yourself, even when there is distortion in the anger expressed at you. When it is God's anger, it is a blow to break you free from bondage, and if you stand without fear, the blow will strike clean and sure.

The turbulence of anger shakes the footings of our self-protective structures. This is very unsettling. When the base of our self image is shaking, we want most of all to bring it stable again. However, if we can trust the love behind the anger and allow the tremors in our soul to continue, what will fall are the

artificial supports we use to prop up a false self image. We will feel exposed and unsure at first, but when the affirmation comes, which always follows anger, when the anger is of love, we will begin to recognize the self we want to be, the self the angry one sees in us. With the strong support of truth we will be able to gain confidence in this image of our selves and begin to walk boldly in it.

Accept God's judgment on the evil. The force of anger is what exposes evil for what it is. Often, when someone is trying gently to confront us of some sinful pattern, we soften the conviction upon ourselves. All of us have a denial system which wants to protect us from shame. This denial system blocks us from hearing the full charge being made. In order to cast down the structures which bind us to sinful patterns and distorted self images, we must accept a strong judgment which pushes past denial and challenges its defenses.

In His love, God is willing to confront strongly. He will come against our defenses, challenging us to admit the truth.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. ... For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools. ... Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.
Rom. 1:18, 21-22, 24 (this is an example of God's anger from His love)

Those who refuse to accept the message in judgment miss the experience of God's healing, restoring, affirming love.

In Psalm 69, David cries out his anguish to God because of accusation against him, yet he accepts the firm hand of His judgment as the cleansing he needs, as the pressure which brings him into the truth which will finally bring honor to God.

O God, it is Thou who dost know my folly, And my wrongs are not hidden from Thee. May those who wait for Thee not be ashamed through me, O Lord GOD of hosts; May those who seek Thee not be dishonored through me, O God of Israel. ... Reproach has broken my heart, and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, And for comforters, but I found none. ... But I am afflicted and in pain; May Thy salvation, O God, set me securely on high. ... For God will save Zion and build the cities of Judah, That they may dwell there and possess it. And the descendants of His servants will inherit it, And those who love His name will dwell in it. Ps. 69:5-6, 20, 29, 35-36

Instead of replying to anger with defensive words like, "You are overstating it. You are making it worse than it is," ask the Spirit of God to help you hear just how bad the evil in your own actions is. Ask for courage to see your heart as God sees it. Join God in the work of getting at the root and pulling it out, so you can walk in freedom and grow in righteousness. Respond to the anger with some force of your own, not against the person who is angry, but for digging this deep root out and pursuing transformation.

Cling to hope. Because God's anger is His love, hold onto the hope of restoration and growth. Even though God's anger is

presented as bringing destruction, this is for the purpose of restoring a true relationship, a true demonstration of His Kingdom. Hold onto the faith which the psalmist expresses in God's long range plan.

Blessed is the man whom Thou dost chasten, O LORD, And dost teach out of Thy law; That Thou mayest grant him relief from the days of adversity, Until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the LORD will not abandon His people, Nor will He forsake His inheritance. For judgment will again be righteous; And all the upright in heart will follow it.

Ps. 94:12-15

When I used to encounter anger in my wife or others, I let my hope fall. I would say (to myself), "This is it. This is the end of the relationship. I can never measure up to what she is asking." Now I realize that by facing the anger I build my hope. Now I see that working on the issue, especially together, strengthens the relationship. Now I know that the end of anger is closer intimacy, and this gives me great hope. The same is true in my encounters with God's anger of love. Now when I recognize that difficulties in my circumstances are coming from God, and I face Him, looking into His anger, I come quickly to hope. I know that He has chosen this time and this set of experiences to shape and strengthen me. I know that I will be closer to Him soon, and I am eager for this.

I still do not enjoy anger. It is not comfortable. I do not like the burst of a person's anger toward me or a group of which I am part. Nor do I enjoy the pressure of God's anger toward me. Yet, learning to stand in the face of anger, in spite of my feelings, has helped me receive the truth which is coming through it. Accepting that anger can be a facet of love has opened me to look at the sin or falsehood in myself which it is

trying to expose. Believing in the love of the one who is angry moves me to accept the pull toward relationship which is being offered, rather than run because of the rejection I fear.

God's love burns. It burns with passion. It burns with jealousy. It burns with anger. Burning love does not feel comfortable. It does not match the image of niceness which we often associate with love. Yet, how do you want to be loved: with a love which is nice and ignores your faults and is willing to share your attentions with other suitors, or a love which believes you are more than you seem and wants to pull you up into a full expression of devotion? Do you really want a love which never reaches anger? Do you want God to just be nice and leave you where you are?

No? Then press into the red hot love of the Father's anger. You will discover an intensity of His love which you have not felt.

8

Outrageous Love

A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, "I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die." So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his two sons.

A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he and there he wasted all his money on wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, "At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man.'"

So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, "Father, I

have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.”

But his father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.” So the party began.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. “Your brother is back,” he was told, “and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.”

The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, “All these years I’ve worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.”

His father said to him, “Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back o life! He was lost, but now he is found!”

Luke 15:11-32 (NLT)

Such outrageous behavior! The younger son's insult to his father, his squandering the family wealth, his profligate lifestyle – all outrageous. Even the state of poverty and desperation to which he was reduced was outrageous, for nothing could be more offensive to Jesus' Jewish listeners than the picture of a man eating the food of unclean pigs. The son was dragged lower than the least of animals. It was outrageous, *but it is what he deserved, isn't it?*

How outrageous for the elder son to refuse his father's wish, which in the strong patriarchal society which is the context for this story, was tantamount to overt rebellion. How outrageous for this son to spit his bitterness in the face of his father with his words. How outrageous to see him left alone in his hatred outside the house of joy. But, *it is only what he deserved, isn't it?*

Yet, this outrage to our sensibilities boils only in the caldron of our self-righteousness. The pious label befitting the punishment, which we write over these two sons, the striking out from our hearts is really the thrust which tries to turn away the sword piercing our pretense of goodness. The he-deserves-it attitude is really a projection of our own fear that, if the truth be known, we would come to an end like one or the other of these sons.

Listen to the story again. Keep your attention this time on the father. He is the most outrageous of all. He outrages our definition of how a respectable man behaves when sons rebel. He outrages our description of how a sober father acts before the son who has brought ridicule upon his name. He outrages our sense of justice when he restores the squanderer to his full rights as a son. He outrages our presumptions of a father's authority by going out to the elder son instead of summoning him inside. He outrages our grip on righteousness when he

gently rebukes the elder son that his hard work added nothing to what he already had.

It is the father in this story who is outrageous – outrageous in extravagant love. The richness of his love absorbs fully the debt left by the younger son. The steadfastness of his love waits daily, impatiently, for the lost son's return. The tenderness in his love does not even listen to the younger son's confession, hearing all in the son's act of returning. The generosity of his love bestows lavish attention on the broken son. The strength of his love is not shaken by the older son's resentment. The patience of his love is not troubled by the older brother's blindness to years of opportunity. The humility of his love leaves the older son in his chosen isolation. In the freedom of his love he treats each son in the way which honors him best.

When we let the flames of our outrage die down and feel the heat of what is truly simmering within, we discover a burning desire to receive such love. The insolent self within aches to believe that such a welcome awaits my admission of the collapse of my extravagant schemes. The prodigal in me yearns to dare counting on such a reception when I concede that I have wasted all I was given. The shamed facile man in me is begging to be restored in such honor. The burdened, over-used slave-son in me is haunted by the hope that it really isn't the labor I do that keeps my father's love. The lonely, distrustful child in me is waiting for the word that would reveal my jealousy and release me to admit my need of a brother. The fearful, weary aspirant in me begs to learn that all I dream of is a gift and not an accomplishment.

This story by Jesus touches a deep, burning desire in us: we *want* such a father. Those of us who are mothers or fathers tend to dismiss behavior like that showed by this father as belonging to over indulgent grandfather's and not appropriate for responsible parenting. We have accepted that it is not wise

to dote on disobedient children thoughtlessly. Yet, such dotting is exactly what we want for ourselves. We might question any parent we saw treating their child thus, but if we risk admitting our own fear-fraught desires, it is just what we would like to receive.

In this description of the Father by Jesus, we see the tenderness of His discipline. When the younger son approaches the father with his arrogant, insulting request to have-it-all-now and have-it-my-way, this father quietly yields. No rebuke. No threats about “what will happen to you.” No cautions to “at least guard the family name.” He gives and lets the son go. Some of our approaches to God are demands like this son’s. We do not recognize such rudeness in our prayers of “just give me what I need to be happy,” but they insult His promise, “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you,” (Matt. 6:33). And our Father quietly accedes, releasing us to learn by hard experience where our true home is, where our real happiness grows. He lets us go, in love. He lets us go, knowing how He will receive us back, planning the celebration of our return before our shadow disappears in the setting sun. His tender love allows us the space to come to our senses on our own.

This father has the self-restraint to honor his trust of his son. He does not impose on him the values which have been modeled to the son. He shows confidence in the son’s heart, in his strength to find his way home, even from a distant land, from a desperate situation. This is a father who can wait in his love, and such waiting honors the son.

By not following after the son to coax him home, by not sending an emissary of relief to the far country when the son’s fortunes broke, this father allows his son the one strand of dignity he had left. He grants the son the freedom to turn toward home himself; to choose the way of salvation. He holds

back his love until the son turns to ask for it. He contains the provision he has set aside in hope until the son reclaims his own right to this. The father allows the boy who went away in selfishness to come home a son in sincere humility.

This is the kind of tender love we can expect to receive when we come to ourselves in honesty and face what we have really abandoned in our search for happiness. This is the reception we can expect when we find the courage to acknowledge the self-centeredness of our ways and choose the place of a grateful servant. This is the kind of Father who is eagerly waiting for us to come home from our prideful efforts to live without His help.

The father who let the younger son leave does go out to the older son. The son who stayed at home, yet lived far away from the father's heart, is the one the father goes after. The son whose selfishness showed in his greedy, bitter labor to earn his inheritance, hears the rebuke intended to crack his shell of pride. The father's rebuke is simple, not accusing, and not forced home by a long speech. He simply speaks the truth which this son daily denied: "All I have is yours." For this son, the way of integrity was not via the freedom of self-discovery. It was by confronting the barrier of his self-righteousness and inviting him to drop it. By dropping his defense, the older son could stand upright and acknowledge the truth: that he is a true son.

This is the kind of firm love we can expect to encounter while we persist in our self-righteous dependence on our own work. This father's gentle rebuke is like what our heavenly Father administers when He comes seeking us in the place of toil to which we have drifted, away from the house of celebration. This is the invitation to yield which we will hear when we stop our labor, whether from weariness or bitterness, and face the Father.

The same Father who respects our need to chose to turn toward home when we have wandered far also respects our responsibility to claim honesty when we have deceived ourselves. This is His tender love, His patient, wise love, measured into each need of our heart. This is his kind discipline which lifts our head out of shame and bows our head into humility. This is His generous love which restores more than we have wasted and reveals the consistent provision when have neglected. This is His welcoming, security-giving, love which keeps the door open so we can come home after making a fool of ourselves and also prepares each day the provision we need after laboring under a delusion. His is a patient, tender, respectful love.

This is the love of Father-God for which your heart burns.

9

Security, or Passion

And as He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And they immediately left the nets and followed Him. Mark 1:16-18

Such a simple invitation: "Follow me," yet such a complex challenge. Follow who? Who are you? Follow where? Where are you going? Why follow? What are you offering?

What made these two fishermen leave their nets and follow – immediately, without the precaution of "time to think about it," without doing the sensible thing of preparing for the journey, without making certain by checking this beckoner's credentials?

No benefits promised. No guarantees offered. No plan described. No testimonies of how great the experience will be or how profitable the enterprise. Just, "Follow me, and I will make you ..."

What moved Simon and Andrew to follow, and James and John, whom Jesus found a little farther along the lake shore? Jesus was not a stranger to them. He was from the region and known to residents as Joseph's son (Luke 4:22). They had seen him when they were with John the Baptist (John 1:35-42). To these brothers, Jesus was both ordinary, a known member of a local family, and special, "the Lamb of God," John the Baptist called him (John 1:36). But, there was more mystery than clarity about Him. What reached their souls that day and turned their backs on family and livelihood to step into the unknown and follow Him?

It was not certainty. They thought he could be the Messiah, but he had none of the credentials which popular teaching predicted for the Deliverer of Israel. They hoped he was the coming king, but he resisted all opportunities to assert this position. They were "hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel," (Luke 24:21), but his determination to walk into the arms of his enemies and accept death at their hands befuddled them. Even up to the day of His ascension, when He said that all had been accomplished, they were uncertain about what kind of deliverer He was (Acts 1:6).

It was not certainty about the man which moved these fishermen to follow. Nor was it confidence in His mission. The proposal to "make you become fishers of men" could not have appealed to any dream of theirs. What did it mean, anyway? If these men, living under the oppression of their Roman rulers, dreamed of freedom it meant an army and weapons and strategy. Jesus had none. If these followers of the Baptist revivalist, dreamed of spiritual revival, Jesus' words may have teased them, but his actions soon disappointed them, as he hid from crowds more often than capitalizing on them. Their urgency in leaving all to follow Jesus was not from the fear of missing an opportunity for riches or power. Jesus offered neither, in either His words or position.

What made them risk the security they had to embark on an unknown journey? What made them abandon the certainty they knew to seek an undefined hope? What is it that compels men to leave places of security and pursue dreams of adventure? Throughout history military leaders like Alexander the Great have motivated men with visions of conquest. Adventurers like Francis Drake have attracted partners with stories of new worlds to discover. What draws men to follow, to abandon the safety of their lives and go out with these risk takers? What drew men to follow Alexander far from the quiet of their homes? What incited men to leave well known shores and sail with Drake into uncharted oceans? What compels us to set aside security and GO?

Passion! These leaders excited passion. Yes, they proposed grand visions which inspired many to follow and enjoy the rewards of conquered lands, but those who were still fighting at the climax of the campaigns, looking for yet more worlds to discover, had been captured by something in the leader himself. They found in him a wind to propel their passion, a horizon to seek for their dreams. These crusaders called men and women to their cause with vivid schemes and lavish enterprises, many of which were not very noble. Jesus also excited passion in men. Jesus also attracted men to a high calling. And He did it with a simple word: "Follow me."

Jesus touched the passion in Simon, Andrew, James, and John, and the other disciples, and in the women who followed also, risking ridicule from family and society by doing so. Then came Stephen, then Paul, and a host of fervent followers down through the centuries. It was not a campaign to save the world which inspired these followers, although His mission does save the world. It was not a promise of eternal bliss which bonded these suffering people to Him, although He does promise an eternal reward. It was, and is, the opportunity to live out of the passion of their souls, our souls, which is the appeal in Jesus'

call. Jesus is the Leader whose goal reaches far enough for the eternal hope hidden in our spirits. Jesus is the One worthy to be the object of the passionate love latent in our hearts. Following Jesus presents the challenge which pushes us out of the toil of the ordinary into the divine adventure for which we secretly aspire.

Certainly Jesus' call to follow Him in His mission is compelling. The cause He represents, the answer He is, the victory He assures, all draw on a vision in our souls and pull on an earnest desire to see a kingdom of justice established on earth. Yes, the reward He promises of Eternity with Him in a glorious heaven, where peace and joy reign, fulfills a deep need within and turns us after Him in pursuit of this. And these motives have drawn many, many people into obedience to Jesus and commitment to the cause of His Kingdom. What I want to expose here is the primary motive beneath even these noble ones. That motive is our passionate love for the Mighty Son of Man, Jesus. We are created to follow Him for the sake of love, and that alone. It is the fire of love in our souls which burns through every other motive. It is the joy of loving Him, and receiving His love, which are fulfilled in the Kingdom of Righteous and in the Eternal City.

Jesus reached for the passion in a person's soul.

And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." Mark 10:21

Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And the blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!" Mark 10:51

... she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Matthew 15:25-27

*And immediately Jesus, perceiving in Himself that the power proceeding from Him had gone forth, turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched My garments?" And His disciples said to Him, "You see the multitude pressing in on You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?'" And He looked around to see the woman who had done this.
Mark 5:30-32*

*Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."
John 4:10*

Jesus' words, which sound blunt, even cruel at times, were a penetrating hook digging past the façade of performance or immediate need in a person to the core force which attracted the person to him. He wanted a response from there, from the place where the person's passion lay, not just from the cover of their present situation. He knew it was there. He wanted the

person to feel it, to own it, to come open with it. The man who excited people's passion wanted them to ride on it, after him – or turn away.

As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore. Jesus said therefore to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. John 6:66-68

Jesus' strategy was insidious if there is not in every person an ember of passion waiting to be stirred. His use of parables and offensive language worked against Him if His intention was to win the allegiance of the nation's political soul for a great campaign.

He did not appeal to the desires of the day so he could win a following, even though the crowd's needs evoked His compassion. He was not trying to shape public opinion so it would see the good promise of His Kingdom and support Him. He did not capitalize on the surface desires in people, did not pull on their immediate needs. He yanked the line which ran deep into their passions, into the central motive of their souls, so they would follow because they *had* to.

Jesus blew a force of air into the souls of women and men, and where the grate was open, where desperation or hope had kept coals simmering, the fire burst up, and they rose up, and followed. It was the fire He sought, not just a happy band. That is why He scorned the religious professionals and drove away the casually interested bystanders. If he could not start a fire of passion in them, He wanted nothing to do with them. He looked for heat and incited fire.

The same is true today. Jesus is blowing toward your hearth of passion. His wind is sometimes sharp, like the words to the woman pleading with Him to heal her daughter, cutting through a false identity to evoke a genuine need. His breath is sometimes cold, like the challenge to the rich young man, chilling self-righteousness, but warming sincere desire. His blowing is sometimes far off, mysterious, like His remarks to the woman at the well, yet beckoning to the hope lost amidst shame and rejection.

The experiences He sends, or allows, into our lives often stun us, but they are a shaking of the coals, a stirring of the fire, so our passion will take in more of His wind and glow more intensely in love. It happens where there is a fire burning. When you are drawing your life from the fire of love within, all experiences intensify it. When you pass your feelings through the flame of your passion for God, they are purified into expressions of love and gratitude. When you place your theology or values, into the forge of your burning love, they are tempered into strong and true bands of integrity.

But, if the fire of your passion has grown cold, experiences from without and attitudes from within end up raw and limp on the hearth of your soul. If you block His wind because it is sharp or cold or seems weak, if you turn away from facing the wind because God is not giving what you think you need, you will not have the bright light of love's fire which reveals the gold in *every* experience.

There is passion in our souls waiting to be released. There is a fire in our hearts waiting to be fanned into brilliant flames of love and desire. The impulse of passion within is so strong that it provokes fear in us. We feel its power, and we are afraid of where it could lead. (And we have seen or done enough excesses in the name of passion to confirm our fears.) We sense passion's surge, and we tremble at the size of the wave it

would release. We feel its intensity building and hesitate because of the loss of control we know will follow. We thrill to its beating, but hide from the full cacophony which would sound in its release.

The passion is there. Though fear may pressure us to quiet it, with legalistic restrictions or busy distractions, it continues to beat. Though hurtful experiences may pull us to withdraw from its heat, by fantasy substitutions or soul restricting disciplines, it sears into our hope. Though rebukes and warnings by others may scare us into denial or into covering it with layers of safe behaviors, it leaks into our dreams.

Passion perplexes us. It is as familiar as affection and as mysterious as love. It is as gentle as a mother cradling her baby and as violent as a man breaking free of chains to win one last kiss from his beloved. It is as disciplined as a woman keeping pure a commitment held only by a line in a letter written years past and as chaotic as a man weathering storms and battles to return to the one to whom he pledged love when the call of war forced him to leave. It is intensely quiet, as in the silence of two lovers rapt in each other's attention, and it is absurdly loud, as when one calls unabashedly to the other across a crowded plaza. It is as responsible as a single mother working two jobs to sustain her family and as wild as a youth running off to Paris to discover if he is an artist. It is as practical as a groom planning the perfect details for his honeymoon and as crazy as the couple abandoning them all for the pleasure of the place they find the first night.

Jesus' simple but absolute call, "Follow me," confronts us with the choice of holding back onto our need for security, or plunging forward in our passionate desire to discover the life He represents, the Life He is.

Passion is fueled by dreams and carried by hope. And our need for security is the anchor which holds us down. That is, security becomes an anchor when we work for it rather than run in our passion, when we release our passion for the Father's ways and love.

Security shuts the vents through which flow the winds that inflame passion. Security blocks the exits by which we could escape into one of passion's dreams. Security closes the windows through which passion gazes into the distant possibilities of life. Security straightens the road which passion loves to race through steep turns and surprising dips.

I do not mean to defame our sincere need for security. Trust in safety and confidence in provision are basic human needs. However, when we fix our attention on acquiring them, our eyes leave the heights for which our souls yearn and fix on the low lands of materialism.

Security is not provided by a guaranteed income (which is a marketplace deception), nor by the home of our dreams (which can collapse as quickly as a daydream), nor by "a strong defense" (which seems real only if you insulate your heart from the plight of those outside it), nor by a happy family or community (which can be invaded by pain or rebellion at any moment), nor by an air-tight theology (which holds only by denying the paradoxes of life, and the Bible).

Security is not in any thing. It is in a person, the person who says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). Who says, "Follow me." It is not when we are sitting in the middle of our well-fortified castle enjoying a grand feast that we are secure. It is when we are rushing forward with the Champion of our hearts in conquest of our dreams, in setting the joys of His Kingdom on the earth.

The demand for security resists the release of passion when we see it as something to have rather than a side benefit of following Jesus.

For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. Matthew 16:25

The appeal to our passion threatens our hold on security, but when we relax the hold and let passion run, we find the security we truly trust: in Jesus our Leader.

Passion is a force toward expansion. It is a general impetus to encompass more. It is passion which pushes the bloom in the soul to open to full beauty. It is passion which gives courage to the heart to open again and again to love, and wider each time. Passion extends love to one, then another, then another, then a nation, then a people. Passion propels the drive to climb yet another mountain, to sail yet another ocean. The senses of body and soul can never be satiated, and it is passion which surges in us so that we hold open for more and more.

Passion is also a drive for a goal. It is an arrow winging toward a triumphant dream. Passion carries the exhausted runner a few more paces to the finish. Passion disciplines the artist to hold back the painting until every possible stroke is completed. Passion pushes the conductor through one more rehearsal until the sound is just right. Passion chases the architect through drawing after drawing to find the design which majestically exploits the site.

Passion does not pursue satisfaction, but expansion. It does not want to be realized but increased. Passion wants to give all it has, then find a well within from which surges a supply equal to what has been given. Passion seeks a relationship in which the giving and receiving of love charge both persons with

energy for more, and catalyze discovery in both of what had not been seen before.

Passion is the fire of love in my heart, in your heart. Jesus' call to follow excites this fire. Jesus words and actions, when we receive them as wind into this fire of love, intensify the burning. This is His appeal. This is also our desire: to follow!

Love II

*Immortal Heat, O let thy greater flame
Attract the lesser to it: let those fires,
Which shall consume the world, first make it tame;
And kindle in our hearts such true desires,
As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.
Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain
All her invention on thine Alter lay,
And there in hymns send back thy fire again:
Our eyes shall see thee, which before saw dust;
Dust blown by wit, till that they both were blind:
Thou shalt recover all thy goods in kind,
Who wert disseised by usurping lust:
All knees shall bow to thee, all wits shall rise,
And praise him who did make and mend our eyes.*

George Herbert

10

Created for Intimacy

We are created for intimacy, to live in the fire of the Father's fierce love, in the embrace of the Bridegroom's jealous passion. The writer of Song of Songs knew this. The revelation to Hosea, in chapter 2, shows this. The disciples of Emmaus felt this, ("Were not our hearts burning within us ... ? Luke 24:32).

Pilgrims plumbing the depths of their souls for the deepest fount of the love of God learned this. Seekers like Mechthild of Magedeburg, a member of the Beguine community in thirteenth century Germany. She writes of the intense love of God,

*O Lord,
Love me intensely,
Love me often and long!
For the more often you love me, the purer I become.
The more intensely you love me, the more beautiful I become.
The longer you love me, the holier I become.*

Seekers like John of the Cross, a monk living in Spain at the same time, who sings of intimacy in his poem,
THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE

*O living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest center! Since
Now you are not oppressive
Now consummate! If it be your will:
Tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!*

*O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
That tastes of eternal life
And pays every debt!
In killing you changed death to life.*

*O lamps of fire!
In whose splendors
The deep caverns of feeling,
Once obscured and blind,
Now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
Both warmth and light to their beloved.*

*Now gently and lovingly
You wake in my heart,
Where in secret you dwell alone;
And in your sweet breathing,
Filled with good and glory,
How tenderly you swell my heart with love.*

Such intimacy is our destiny, the promise we have for Eternity³. It is ours more in longing than in consummation in this life, yet it is ours. The Father is pursuing me, pursuing

³ See John 14:2-3, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also". The image here is of a bridegroom going to build the wedding chamber for his bride.

you. The Bridegroom is wooing me, wooing you. The longing of my heart, and of your heart is to know Him, to live in the fire of His fierce love.

Even though we are made to experience this intense love, we cannot sustain it always. Our bodies and souls are of this fractured age, and we cannot hold the fiery coals of the Father's fierce love for long. We must relent of the pursuit at times. We must back away from the heat to catch our breath. This is a normal rhythm of passion. I do not condemn myself when the experience wanes. I do not deride myself when the pursuit must be set aside for the common activities of life. I enjoy the times of ordinary loving, and anticipate the moments of intimacy which will come.

On a ski weekend in the Alps of Switzerland I was lodged in a hundred-year-old cottage. The walls were rustic, the furnishings weathered, and the ceiling low. Outside the world was cold and white with fresh snow. The cottage was heated from a fireplace, naturally, which offered the comforts of both warmth and the cozy feel of the fire. In the quiet reflection of the early morning I saw in the fire my own burning heart.

The flames and the wood were one in the fire, just as the wood of my love for Father God is made one with the flame of love from Him. As I added logs to fuel the fire, I accepted the fuel of my self, building my fire of love: the well-cut logs of my gifts and my service to Him, and the splintered logs of my pain, failures, and weaknesses.

I see them consumed together, all a common source for the burning. I see the glowing ashes, brilliant residue of each thing I have given to the fire, and they reflect a beauty in it which, separate from it and cold, they did not have. I feel the heat radiating from the fire and take comfort and strength in the warmth of my fire of love; love given; love received. One love.

There is a fire burning through your heart. As you make the choice to place each brand of self and experience into the fire, you are drawn more fully into it. It is love for Father God. It is love from Father God. It is love of God

FIRE OF LOVE

*Burn, fire of love, in my heart;
Draw your fuel from every part;
Take hopes and dreams and let them feed
The brightness of your holy greed.
Desires, passions: blow as wind
Into your core, themselves to spend.*

*Sear, heat of love, into my soul;
There to purify every toll
Which sorrow and loss have taken,
And so reveal what is given
By the embers of their dying
To the beauty of your rising.*

*Rise, flame of love, from my being,
On your tips my offering winging;
In your climbing give expression
From the burning of this passion
To the One who from his fire
Bore the torch which lit this alter.*

*Leap, flash of love, out from this self,
Contained no more, as on a shelf;
Cascade, explode you glowing coals
Upon the tinder of cold souls,
And light a blaze upon the hearth
Which waits, expectant, in their heart.*

dwo, 4/02