

The Theme of Fire in Luke – Acts

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Light and Fire as Literary Themes: Starting Point

^{2:25} And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for him the custom of the Law, ²⁸ then he took him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,

²⁹ 'Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace,
According to Your word;

³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation,

³¹ Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² A **light** of revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel.'

^{3:2} The word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. ³ And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... ⁸ 'Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the **fire**. ¹⁰ And the crowds were questioning him, saying, 'Then what shall we do?' ¹¹ And he would answer and say to them, 'The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.' ¹² And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' ¹³ And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.' ¹⁴ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, 'And what about us, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.' ¹⁵ Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals; he will baptize you with the **Holy Spirit and fire**. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable **fire**.'" ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

Fire as Purifying, Light

Fire as Destroying, Darkness

^{3:21} Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while he was praying, heaven was opened, ²² and the **Holy Spirit** descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in you I am well-pleased.'

^{8:15} But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance. ¹⁶ Now no one after **lighting a lamp** covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the **light**. ¹⁷ For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and

^{9:54} When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command **fire** to come down from heaven and consume them?' ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them, [and said, 'You do not know what kind of **spirit** you are of; ⁵⁶ for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'] And they went on to another village.

^{17:26} And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: ²⁷ they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸ It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were

come to **light**.¹⁸ So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.

^{9:28} Some eight days after these sayings, he took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face became different, and his clothing became **white and gleaming**.³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him; and they were Moses and Elijah,³¹ who, appearing in glory, were speaking of his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.³² Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.³³ And as these were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not realizing what he was saying.³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.³⁵ Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to him!'

^{11:33} No one, after **lighting a lamp**, puts it away in a cellar nor under a basket, but on the lampstand, so that those who enter may see the **light**.³⁴ The eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is clear, your whole body also is full of **light**; but when it is bad, your body also is full of darkness.³⁵ Then watch out that the **light** in you is not darkness.³⁶ If therefore your whole body is full of **light**, with no dark part in it, it will be wholly illumined, as when the **lamp** illumines you with its rays.'

^{12:49} I have come to cast **fire** upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!

buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building;²⁹ but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained **fire** and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.³⁰ It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.³¹ On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back.³² Remember Lot's wife.³³ Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.

^{16:19} Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.²⁰ And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores,²¹ and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.²² Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.²³ In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in **torment**, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom.²⁴ And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this **flame**.'²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in **agony**.²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'²⁷ And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house –²⁸ for I have five brothers – in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of **torment**.'²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'³⁰ But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!'³¹ But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.³ And there appeared to them **tongues as of fire** distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.⁴ And they were all filled with the **Holy Spirit** and began to speak with other tongues, as the **Spirit** was giving them utterance.

^{9:3} As [Saul of Tarsus] was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a **light** from heaven flashed around him;⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'⁵ And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,⁶ but get

up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.’⁷ The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. [...] ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’

^{12:7} And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a **light** shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And his chains fell off his hands.

^{13:47} For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have placed you as a **light** for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the earth.’

^{26:15} And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.¹⁶ But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you;¹⁷ rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you,¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to **light** and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me.’

Cultural and Historical Background

- *Fire and Darkness*: ‘Fire and darkness’ represent staying on the outside of God. Jesus refers to Israel’s rejection of God at Mount Sinai. Notice that Moses went up to God’s presence on the mountain, *in the fire*. And then, Moses emerged with his face shining (Ex.34), like Jesus in his transfiguration (Lk.9:28 – 36).

^{4:11} You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain *burned with fire* to the very heart of the heavens: *darkness*, cloud and thick gloom...²⁴ For the LORD your God is a consuming *fire*, a jealous God...^{5:4} The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire,⁵ while I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the *fire* and did not go up the mountain...²⁴ You said...²⁷ Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it.’ (Dt.4:11 – 5:27)

Jesus appears to be saying that he is the ‘new Moses,’ (i.e. mediator) (re)making the covenant. So to reject Jesus is to reject God and His desired covenant relationship with humanity.

- *Making Responsible Conclusions from Narratives*: In the Book of Acts, God frees the apostles from prison three times (Acts 5:19 – 20; 12:6; 16:25 – 26). Should we conclude that God *will surely* free us from prison if we are jailed for preaching? Notice there are times where God did *not* free the apostles or other Christians from prison (Acts 8:3; 12:1 – 2; 23:11 – 28:31). So when we treat the theme of fire in Luke, we have to perceive both sides of the theme.

Questions

1. In Luke 3:2 - 18, is fire good or bad for us?
2. So when is fire good for us? Fire seems good when it is received *into* ourselves. We become lamps bearing light from within (8:15 - 18; 11:33 - 36).
 - a. When a lamp is lit, isn't it useful? Helpful to others? Yup -it sheds *light* for those around.
 - b. In fact, isn't there a connection between the Holy Spirit, fire, and *light*? Jesus begins to shine light, when he is transfigured (Lk.9:28 - 36), and we can assume that Jesus after his resurrection continued to shine that way. Because Jesus' baptism, transfiguration, and death and resurrection are all linked up.
 - i. At both his baptism and his transfiguration, Jesus hears his Father say, 'My Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'
 - ii. At his baptism, Jesus went down into the water, and then rose up again. That symbolized his death and resurrection. So all of this is driving towards his death and resurrection. The transfiguration, too.
 - iii. Moses saw God face to face and his face shined with light and glory. But Jesus is God being face to face with us, and his entire human nature shines with light and glory.
 - c. Isn't the Holy Spirit the fire and the light? What does fire do? Consume. It also purifies by consuming what is impure. If the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in his baptism and immediately helped Jesus resist temptation (Lk.4:1 - 13), and therefore purify his human nature all the way to his death and resurrection, then doesn't the Holy Spirit want to purify us, too? By bringing the new humanity of Jesus into us?
3. But how is fire bad for us? When we resist the purification!!
 - a. So if God as fire, or the Holy Spirit as fire, is trying to destroy your sin by burning it away, how will that feel if you want to hold on to your sin? Like God is trying to destroy you!
 - b. Fire is a destroying force from the perspective of the thing it's trying to destroy. But fire is a purifying force from the perspective of the person being purified. That explains why fire is used in both ways here (and actually in every biblical book - you can confirm that).
 - c. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk.16:19 - 31), it seems to me that the main issue is desire. Did the rich man desire Jesus more than riches? And did the rich man desire for Lazarus to be a full brother in God's family? Notice that he still wants to boss Lazarus around? That's why it is torment for him: His values have been rejected and flipped over, and Lazarus is a full equal. He can't take it.
4. In Acts 2:1 - 13, we see fires settling on the heads of each disciple at Pentecost. Do you know what the Day of Pentecost meant on the Jewish feast calendar? What did it commemorate?
 - a. Pentecost commemorates the day the Sinai covenant was made, the day God appeared on top of Mount Sinai to make a covenant with Israel.
 - b. If God appeared in fire at Mount Sinai, what does it mean that God appeared with fire on each disciple in Acts 2? Each believer in Jesus was a mini-Sinai, a mini dwelling place of God. God was marking them as being in the covenant by their faith in Jesus, the mediator of the covenant.
5. What does this mean that the fires of hell are?
 - a. Purifying! At least from God's side. Some people might experience it as destroying, but that's up to us. If you resist God's purifying power, and cling onto your sin, then that might eventually lead to you rejecting Jesus - be careful!! Do we really want Jesus or not?
 - b. Notice my note regarding the Book of Acts. Just because Acts has three stories where God busts the apostles out of prison for preaching Jesus, is that a reason for us to conclude that God will bust us out of prison for preaching? No! Because right there in Acts, there are three other times mentioned where God does not bust apostles out of prison. You have to take both sides of the theme. The theme of fire is the same way, in every biblical book. It has two sides. And we can't just take the side about destruction as if that's the only thing going on.
 - c. So HELL IS THE LOVE OF GOD. Yeah, sure, hell is the wrath of God against the cancer in our bodies, and the addiction in our hearts, so to speak. But hell is the love of God FOR US, FOR OUR PERSONHOOD. Just like the surgeon's wrath burns against the cancer in your body because he LOVE YOU. The counselor's wrath burns against the alcoholism in your heart because he LOVES YOU. The surgeon and the counselor want to destroy the problem WITHIN YOU and see you set FREE. God is a surgeon and counselor. He wants to JUDGE THE SIN IN US AND DESTROY IT, ABSOLUTELY, WITH NO MERCY WHATSOEVER. In fact, God

has already judged the sin in Jesus and destroyed it completely! He is the surgeon who became the patient, so He could give His new humanity to everyone. He wants to HEAL EACH AND EVERY PERSON.

6. What about the Book of Revelation? Doesn't the lake of fire mean 'separation' from Jesus?
 - a. Well, Revelation says that fire comes in the *presence* of Jesus: 'Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, '...he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and *in the presence of the Lamb.*' (Rev.14:10)
 - b. What Old Testament reference(s) are contained in the story of the lake of fire? Exodus, where Pharaoh and the army of Egypt are thrown into the Red Sea. So this language is just about Jesus' victory. It does not indicate that it's 'separation' from Jesus.
 - c. For a thematic analysis of the theme of fire in Revelation, see: <http://nagasawafamily.org/john-revelation-theme-fire.sg.pdf>
7. What about fire away from Jesus' presence? Doesn't 2 Thessalonians 1:9 say that? Actually, probably not.
 - a. Here are four popular translations:
 - i. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (RSV)
 - ii. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (NRSV)
 - iii. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (NIV)
 - iv. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (ESV)
 - b. But now consider these four translations:
 - i. Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (KJV)
 - ii. who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might (ASV)
 - iii. who shall suffer justice — destruction age-during — from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his strength (YLT)
 - iv. who shall incur the justice of eonian extermination from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of His strength (CLNT)
 - c. Here are two renderings based on the Latin Vulgate translation:
 - i. Who shall suffer eternal punishment in destruction, from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (Douay-Rheims)
 - ii. The presence of the Lord, and the majesty of his power, will condemn them to eternal punishment (Ronald Knox)
 - d. Says Father Aidan Kimel:

'So why the difference in translations? All translations, of course, are interpretations; but the translators of the RSV, NRSV, NIV, and ESV have quite literally introduced an interpretation that goes beyond the Greek. There is no verb in the Greek text that suggests separation or hiding and therefore there is no necessity to read the preposition "from" as "away from." At very least these "away from" translations must be judged as speculative attempts to bring clarity to a less than clear original text. Tom Talbot elaborates:

'But in the context of 2 Thessalonians 1:9, we find no relevant verb, such as "to hide" or "to conceal," no relevant subject of the action, and no other grammatical device that would entitle one to translate apo as "away from." In the absence of such a device, such a translation makes no more coherent sense in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 than it would in Acts 3:19, where the wording is identical: "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." Just as the presence of the Lord is the causal source, or that which brought about, refreshing times for the obedient, so the appearance of the Lord "with his mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess 1:7-8) is the causal source of, or that which brings about, the destruction of the disobedient. No other understanding seems to me even remotely plausible. "Destruction away from the glory of his might" simply makes no sense at all in the

context, but “destruction that comes from or has its causal source in “the glory of his might” makes perfectly good sense. (*The Inescapable Love of God*, p. 90)”¹

8. Illus: We can say with T.S. Eliot, in his poem *Four Quartets*:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

9. Illus: This is a good exemplary quote from Ambrose (337 – 394 AD), bishop of Milan, teacher of Augustine of Hippo. Early Christian teachers and leaders regularly spoke this way: ‘And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: “A fire shall burn in His sight.” For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints. (Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170)
10. Illus: Athanasius even had said a few decades earlier that the light that Saul of Tarsus saw on the Damascus Road was *fire*. ‘For a servant of the Lord should be diligent and careful, yea, moreover, burning like a flame, so that when, by an ardent spirit, he has destroyed all carnal sin, he may be able to draw near to God who, according to the expression of the saints, is called ‘a consuming fire [Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:26; Hebrews 12:29].’ Therefore, the God of all, ‘Who makes His angels [spirits],’ is a spirit, ‘and His ministers a flame of fire [Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7].’ Wherefore, in the departure from Egypt, He forbade the multitude to touch the mountain, where God was appointing them the law, because they were not of this character. But He called blessed Moses to it, as being fervent in spirit, and possessing unquenchable grace, saying, ‘Let Moses alone draw near [Exodus 24:2].’ He entered into the cloud also, and when the mountain was smoking, he was not injured; but rather, through ‘the words of the Lord, which are choice silver purified in the earth [Psalm 12:6],’ he descended purified. Therefore the blessed Paul, when desirous that the grace of the Spirit given to us should not grow cold, exhorts, saying, ‘Quench not

¹ Father Aidan Kimel, *Thomas Talbott: The Inescapable Love of God* (Eclectic Orthodoxy blog, Feb 22, 2015) <https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2015/02/22/book-review-the-inescapable-love-of-god-part-5/>

the Spirit [1 Thessalonians 5:19].’ For so shall we remain partakers of Christ, if we hold fast to the end the Spirit given at the beginning. For he said, ‘Quench not;’ not because the Spirit is placed in the power of men, and is able to suffer anything from them; but because bad and unthankful men are such as manifestly wish to quench it, since they, like the impure, persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds. ‘For the holy Spirit of discipline will flee deceit, nor dwell in a body that is subject unto sin; but will remove from thoughts that are without understanding [Wisdom 1:5].’ Now they being without understanding, and deceitful, and lovers of sin, walk still as in darkness, not having that ‘Light which lights every man that comes into the world [John 1:9].’ Now a fire such as this laid hold of Jeremiah the prophet, when the word was in him as a fire, and he said, ‘I pass away from every place, and am not able to endure it [Jeremiah 20:9].’ And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this upon earth, and said, ‘And what? Would that it were already kindled [Luke 12:49]!’ For He desired, as He testified in Ezekiel, the repentance of a man rather than his death [Ezekiel 18:32]; so that evil should be entirely consumed in all men, that the soul, being purified, might be able to bring forth fruit; for the word which is sown by Him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred. [Mark 4:20] Thus, for instance, those who were with Cleopas, although infirm at first from lack of knowledge, yet afterwards were inflamed with the words of the Savior, and brought forth the fruits of the knowledge of Him [Luke 24:13 – 34]. The blessed Paul also, when seized by this **fire**, revealed it not to flesh and blood, but having experienced the grace, he became a preacher of the Word [Acts 9]. But not such were those nine lepers who were cleansed from their leprosy, and yet were unthankful to the Lord who healed them [Luke 17:11 – 17]; nor Judas, who obtained the lot of an apostle, and was named a disciple of the Lord, but at last, ‘while eating bread with the Savior, lifted up his heel against Him, and became a traitor.’ But such men have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude; for there is no hope for the ungrateful, the last fire, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful.’ (Athanasius of Alexandria, 331 AD, *Third Festal Letter* 3 – 4)