

Jesus Came to...Cast Fire on the Earth

Sermon preached by Jonathan Huang for Houston Chinese Church
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❖ Introduction

- Back in 2006, I was part of this summer program as a college student where we traveled from city to city in China to learn about the healthcare system there.
- So we did things like visit their medical schools and saw how Traditional Chinese Medicine and Western medicine were integrated into the Chinese medical education.
- I still remember this one conversation that I had with a student on that trip. We were on a plane. I was sitting next to her.
- And, as we were talking, I learned that she had just become a Christian. In fact, she used to be a Muslim but now was a Christ follower.
- Because of this decision, though, she had a death threat on her. This death threat was *by her own father*.
- You don't forget those kinds of conversations easily.
- I mean you hear about Christians being persecuted all around the world. It's been happening since the days of the early church. But I don't think, up until that day, I had ever met someone so up close and personal who had to choose Jesus – at such a high cost.
- And it feels a lot like the passage we're going to look at today. Jesus says some hard things here.
- I mean, in the middle of Advent, when we're supposed to be celebrating the “good news of great joy,” (Luke 2:10, ESV), why in the world are we talking about how Jesus came to cast *fire* on the earth?
- Last week, Pastor Henry taught us about how Jesus came to proclaim good news. Next week, Pastor Jason's going to be preaching about how Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Those make sense.
- That's Advent. But casting fire on earth? Coming not to bring peace but division?
- Wait a minute, Jesus. Didn't the angels praise God in front of the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace*, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14, KJV; emphasis mine)?

- Didn't you say to your disciples in John 14:27, "*Peace* I leave with you; my *peace* I give you" (NIV, emphasis mine)?
- Didn't you say in John 16:33, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have *peace*" (NIV, emphasis mine)?
- So, Jesus, aren't you contradicting yourself a bit here? You talk about all this peace you're wanting to give. But Luke 12 tells us that you don't want us to think you've come to give peace on earth. You came to bring *division*, not peace.
- *What...is...going...on?*
- Well, for the record, I *don't* think there's any contradiction here. And what I want to do with the rest of the time I have with you is to prove that. And not only prove that, but I want to convince you that it's actually a *good* thing that Jesus says what he says here—that he came to "cast *fire* on the earth" (Luke 12:49a, ESV; emphasis mine). I want to convince you that it's ultimately still good news for us that he came not to bring peace, but division.
- I think the Holy Spirit would include passages like this in the Bible to show Christians and prospective Christians throughout the ages what we should expect if we decide to follow Jesus.
- If you're not a Christian here today, do you really know what you're getting yourself into if you decide to become a Christian? Sometimes, it can be easy to have misguided ideas of the kind of life you'd have if you were to follow Jesus.
- But Christian, do you know the kind of Jesus that I'm talking about here today?
- The Jesus who says he's here to divide, and not give peace?
- When hard times come and you face pain in your life because of your faith, just like the former Muslim friend I was talking about, it can be easy to lose heart, to get discouraged, to question God.
- But maybe you too have misguided ideas about the Christian life and what it means to follow Jesus.
- So for all of us in this room, may Scripture bring us some clarity to this confusion. Why did Jesus *really* come into this world? And what will it *cost* us if we choose to follow him?

❖ The Intentions of Jesus

- If you have your Bibles, I want you to turn with me to the book of Luke. We're in chapter 12, starting in verse 49.
- Luke chapter 12 opens up with this image of Jesus being completely surrounded by thousands of people trying to be near him. The Bible says that people were gathered around Jesus in such a way that "they were *trampling* one another" (12:1, ESV; emphasis mine).
- And in the middle of teaching different things and telling parables, Jesus throws down this bomb of a statement, saying, "I came to cast *fire* on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49, ESV; emphasis mine).
- What does Jesus mean when he says he came to cast *fire* on the earth?
- We could take this literally. But if so, why, in Luke 9, did Jesus rebuke James and John for asking if they should "tell fire to come down from heaven and consume" the Samaritans after they refused to receive Jesus into their village (9:52-55, ESV)?
- Jesus could have cast down literal fire from heaven just like "the fire of the LORD fell" on the altar in the days of Elijah in the OT (1 Kings 18:38, ESV). But he didn't.
- So if this wasn't meant to be literal, then what does it mean for Jesus to cast fire on the earth symbolically? What was he trying to say?
- I think it helps if you read verse 49 in the context of verse 51, where Jesus talks about himself coming to bring division, not peace.
- This connection between fire and division among people on earth seems to be suggesting that the fire here in Luke 12 is, as two commentators have suggested, a "refining fire of division between believers and unbelievers."¹
- Jesus came to bring the fire of *clarity* on earth to distinguish between those who are his and those who are not his. Between those who submit to the rule of God and those who are still under the rule of the devil.
- Jesus' fire that he brings is a fire of clarity.
- When my wife first became a Christian, it was painfully obvious to those in her family that she was now different. Being Japanese, her family with its Buddhist influences had a tradition of offering incense and praying in front of pictures of her grandparents in the home – a form of ancestral worship.

¹ Wayne Grudem and Thomas R. Schreiner, Study notes on Luke, in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1983-1984.

- She had to her mother that she wasn't going to do that anymore. Seven years after one of her grandmothers died, there was an expectation for family members to offer incense and pray at a temple. My wife, being a Christian, couldn't do that either in good conscience.
- For my wife, becoming a Christian meant that she would no longer blend into the rest of her family like she used to. She was different, even at the cost of others thinking of her as weird or improper.
- But this is the cost of discipleship – to be thrust into the limelight of being different. Being classified as “other.” Because when Jesus came, he came to cast the fire of clarity on earth, separating out those who now belong to him and those who don't.
- He didn't come to make your life warm and cozy. He came to set you apart. To call you out of darkness and into light. Those were his intentions. And he did so by casting the fire of clarity on this earth.
- So are you ok with that? Christian, have you settled in your mind to be identified with Jesus no matter what it might cost you? No matter what impact it might have on your social life? On the way others think about you?
- And for those of you who aren't Christians, I hope you see what following Jesus will mean for you.
- And that you'd be willing to embrace a kind of Jesus who causes disruption to your life. It's worth it. I'll show you why it's worth it as we move along.
- So if Luke chapter 12, verse 49 is the main point of what Jesus is trying to say, verses 50-53 serve to flesh out just exactly what he means.

❖ **The “Baptism” of Jesus**

- And so let's move on to verse 50. Look down there with me. “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (ESV).
- The baptism Jesus is talking about here is not the water baptism he went through in Matthew chapter 3.
- The Greek word here for “baptism” is used in the sense of a really grueling experience that someone is completely “plunged” into.²
- This word is used in Mark 10 in the same way when two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, ask Jesus to let them sit at his “right hand” and “left hand” in his glory (10:37, ESV).

² Logos Bible Word Study, “βάπτισμα.”

- But Jesus tells them, “You don’t know what you’re asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink or to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38, CSB).
- He says further, “You *will* drink the cup I drink, and you *will* be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with” (Mark 10:39, CSB; emphasis mine).
- Legend has it that the apostle John was ordered by the Roman emperor, Domitian, to be cast into “a cauldron of boiling oil,” only to survive in a miraculous way.³
- And James eventually dies by martyrdom at the hands of King Agrippa I.⁴
- The cup Jesus uniquely drinks is the one he asks his Father to take away in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion (Matt. 26:39).
- And the baptism Jesus is talking about here is the baptism of his suffering and death. Which is why Jesus says he has great “distress until it is accomplished” (Luke 12:50, ESV).
- The Greek word for “accomplished” here is the same word in different form when Jesus says on the cross, “It is *finished*” (John 19:30, ESV; emphasis mine).
- Why did Jesus have to die? Have you ever asked yourself that question?
- Wouldn’t it be much easier – if God could do *anything* in this world – to just snap his finger, and in a moment, forgive everybody’s sins, and make the world believe in him?
- No, Jesus’ baptism of death and suffering was necessary.
- Because you can’t just think of things the way you want to think of things. You have to get inside the mind of God to figure out why things are the way they are.
- And the Bible tells us that sin separates us from God. And each of us will one day have to give an account for our sinful actions and thoughts, seen or unseen, before a holy God (Heb. 4:13). The Bible also tells us that sin can’t be forgiven unless blood is shed, unless someone or something dies (Heb. 9:22).
- So, as it stands, all of us are to pay *by death*, physical and spiritual death, for our sins.
- Which is why the natural trajectory of all humanity is headed for hell – complete separation from God, *for all eternity*.

³ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 886.

⁴ Chris Kugler, “James, Son of Zebedee,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

- So when Jesus underwent the baptism of death, he did it for us. It was a rescue mission. He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died so that *we* wouldn't have to be plunged into the depths of hell.
- It was with great pain, but also eagerness, that Jesus went to the cross because, as one commentator says, he was going to “suffer and save humankind at the same time.”⁵
- Jesus came to cast fire on the earth. And he initiates this by undergoing a baptism of death. He casts fire. But he first goes through the fire himself.
- For those of you who are parents, you know how much of a blessing kids are. But especially for the expectant mother, those nine months or so leading up to labor and delivery can be gruesome.
- And then on the day of birth, there's a level of pain that women can have to go through that men will just never fully appreciate. But it's in undergoing that pain and suffering, that moments after, as you're holding your newborn baby, you go, “Ah...this was all worth it.”
- That's the kind of the mix of suffering and joy that Jesus had as he went through his baptism of death. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that there was joy fixed before Jesus' eyes as he “endured the cross, scorning its shame” (NIV).
- So church, do we realize that our very existence as a church depends on the fact that Jesus was willing to be baptized with a baptism of death? He was “slain, and by [his] blood [he] ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9, ESV). Be grateful for a kind of God who would suffer by fire so that we wouldn't have to suffer the fires of hell.
- And if you're not a Christian, I hope it's clear now for you why Jesus had to die on the cross. If Jesus didn't die the way he did, all of us would still be left to fend for ourselves when it comes to the reality of sin in our lives. But life doesn't have to be that way.
- You can be made right with God if you embrace the fact that Jesus Christ lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died.
- You can actually be forgiven of your sins – past, present, and future – if you turn away from your life of rebelling against God and turn towards him to ask for forgiveness of your sins on account of what Jesus has done on the cross on your behalf.
- So we've seen what Jesus actually means when he says that he came to cast fire on the earth. It's a refiner's fire that brings clarity – who's with him and who's not.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1194.

- And this fire gets kindled as he receives his baptism, which isn't referring to his baptism with water, but his baptism by death. Now what does this all mean for us?

❖ The Implications for Us

- When we get to verses 51-53, the focus shifts from Jesus' pain and suffering in his baptism by death to the implications all of this has for us. So, read with me, verse 51. "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (Luke 12:51, ESV).
- Now this is hard to understand. But it's also an opportunity to remind ourselves how important it is to interpret the Bible using other parts of the Bible when trying to draw the right conclusions.
- You might be wondering, "Wait a minute. I thought Jesus came to give peace to this world?"
- And you're right.
- We know from other parts of Scripture that becoming a Christian clearly is supposed to bring us very tangible peace – peace with God and peace with God's people.
- "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1, ESV; emphasis mine). Jesus came to give us a *vertical* peace with God through his gospel.
- "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14, ESV). Jesus came to unite Jews and Gentiles together, bringing a *horizontal* peace between people who were once alienated from each other.
- "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
- And the *peace* of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7, NIV; emphasis mine). Jesus came to fill us with *internal* peace in place of our day-to-day anxieties.
- So, yes, Jesus *has* come to give us peace. But how do you explain verse 51? Jesus seems to totally contradict himself. "Peace?? I haven't come to give peace! I'm here to divide."

- Look at Luke 12, starting in verse 52: “For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (12:52-53, ESV).
- “I’m not here to give peace! I’m here to divide!” That’s what he says. So how do we deal with this apparent contradiction? Is Jesus here for peace or not?
- I think a parallel passage in Matthew 10 can help us figure this out. Starting in verse 34: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (10:34-35, ESV).
- Listen to this, verse 37, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (10:37-39, ESV).
- So putting Matthew 10 and Luke 12 together, here’s what I conclude: when Jesus brings peace to God’s people, which he does, there will be a necessary dividing line drawn between those who follow the ways of Jesus and those who follow the ways of this world.
- Jesus *does* bring peace, but following him may cost us the kind of peace we may have once enjoyed with people, including our own family members, who don’t get why we’ve chosen to follow Jesus or who may even oppose us for doing so.
- But Jesus is asking: *will you trade in peace with the world for peace with me?* This is the cost of discipleship.
- Jesus is saying, “You think I’m here to make your life more nice and comfortable? No! I’m here to rescue you from *hell!* And sometimes, pulling you away from hell and the grip of the devil means a painful tear away from the things or the people you’ve come to love the most.”
- You might say, “Well I thought Jesus came to bring unity.” He did.
- “But doesn’t Jesus say he’s here to bring division?” He does.
- So here’s the bottom line: the unity and peace that Jesus brings is with him and his followers – the division is with the world.
- And in a sense, every one of us will have to experience some implication of this in our lives if we’re serious about following Jesus.

- Just like you can't serve both God and money, your ultimate loyalty can't be Jesus *and* your parents. Or Jesus *and* your friends. Or Jesus *and* your job. Something or someone has to take first place in your heart and everything and everyone else second and third and fourth.
- Listen: *Jesus came to win your heart.*
- And that can lead to some painful situations where you'll have to choose between him or the world.
- Back when my wife and I were going through pre-engagement and pre-marital counseling with Pastor Fred, I was at first really sure that the key issue in our relationship was something that Aya needed to change.
- But over time, it became painfully obvious that the person who needed the most work on was me. You see, growing up as an only child and just the way the dynamics between me and my parents were, I was fiercely loyal to my parents and often went with what they wanted of me.
- But in marriage, a husband is supposed to leave "his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife" (Gen. 2:24, ESV). And part of that leaving is to say that my primary loyalty – humanly speaking, not talking about God here – is no longer going to be to my parents, but to my wife.
- So I had to have some hard conversations with my parents to work through what all that would look like. And as a married man, I've had to learn to tear away a certain level of emotional attachment to my parents so that I can give my primary loyalty to my wife.
- It's the same way with Jesus.
- *Jesus came to win your heart.* He wants *you*. And the more you align yourself with him, the more tension may come between you and this world.
- Are you ok with that? And not just ok with that, but will you actually embrace that?
- Will you embrace a kind of life that's filled with this kind of tension where there's peace with God, but also pain wherever Satan and the world oppose us?
- So for those of you who don't consider yourselves Christians in this room, I hope it's clear now what kind of Jesus you'd be following if you were to become a Christian.
- He's not here to just give you a superficial kind of peace. But he *is* here to give you peace with God and a peace with God's people that will last into eternity.

- Included in a decision to become a Christian is not only to receive Jesus as your Savior, but also your Lord. And if Jesus is your Lord, you will be increasingly nonconformed to this world.
- This may mean increasing tension with the world in different ways, including conflict and division with people who *are* in conformity with this world. Who *don't* see Jesus as Lord.
- To become a Christian is to accept these terms and conditions.
- And for those of you who might be in that very kind of situation where you've become a Christian. You've decided to follow Jesus and you're making some life choices that are causing some serious friction with people perhaps even in your own family. What do you do?
- I'd say two things. First, pray. Pray for God to give you wisdom to know how to navigate the situation. Pray for the strength to follow Jesus at all costs.
- And two, trust. Trust God with the outcome of the situation, even if it means strained relationships with people you love for a season. 1 Peter 4:19 says, "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (ESV).
- Final thing. Christian, Jesus may have been your Lord when you first decided to follow him. But is Jesus still Lord of your life today?
- Ask yourself: Is there anything you'd consider off-limits to God? Is there anything you'd say, "No, Jesus, you can't touch that. You can have anything, but not *that*." Or think about this: "If Jesus takes away _____ (fill in the blank), I would really struggle to keep following and loving and serving him with all my heart."
- I think, for me, the biggest thing in my life right now is a desire to see a church get planted.
- And as great of a thing that that can be, I'll know that it's become an idol in my heart if there's a day I can't honestly say, "Lord, if you want to close this door and you want me to stop, I'm good. Because this is ultimately about you and what you want for my life. Not my reputation. Not my cravings for ministry success. Not my desire to *be* somebody in this world."
- So the division that Jesus is going after in your life might not be about dying to your need to please your parents. It could be your dreams for making it into a certain college. Or your hopes to get married to a certain person. Or the security that you have right now with your current job. It could be anything in this world that's gripping your heart and taking you away from your first love, Jesus Christ.

- I want to give you about a minute to wait on God in silence. Pray and ask God to search your heart. And ask yourself if there is anything that you'd consider off-limits to God.
- Anything you'd say, "No, Jesus, you can't touch that. You can have anything, but not that."
- And if the Holy Spirit brings something to mind, let this be an opportunity to humbly repent and cry out to God for his forgiveness. Pray for his help in giving your whole heart back to Jesus. Because after all, Jesus came to cast fire on the earth. And he did so by his baptism of death, so that, in the end, he would win your heart.