

Theme: Facing the Fire

1. The Troubles of Life Overwhelm Me
2. Jesus Turns Weakness Into Strength

“Most people resist change, especially change they consider destructive,” says the author of an article from the National Forest Magazine. She’s talking about wildfires, that force of nature that just months ago was destroying the property and lives of thousands of people in Australia, and before that in California. When you look at the destruction that wildfires like those can cause, it’s not surprising if it fills you with fear - fires are clearly dangerous!

But that’s not what this author is saying - she’s telling you to look past what you feel about fires and consider them more carefully. You might be surprised to learn just how good fires can be. Did you know that regular brush fires are part of the cycle of a healthy forest? Old, dead plant matter needs to be burned away so that new life can spring up. Some trees need fire to live - lodgepole pine cones can’t open to spread their seeds until the heat of a fire melts their protective coating of sap.

Fire causes change, no matter what it touches - it can be a force of destruction, or rebirth. But the unpredictable nature of that change makes people nervous, and understandably so. A raging fire is far outside of the control of any one person, after all. But does that mean we have to live every day in fear of fires? Of course not! It’s possible to appreciate the benefits of wildfires while being aware of their risks.

Have you ever thought of your life like it was a wildfire? Does it ever seem out of control, far more than you can handle? Do things in your life press in on you from every side, stressing you out by turning up the heat? First, know that you’re not alone - this sinful world attacks and pressures us all in many different ways. But then, consider this: is it possible, that just like wildfires clear the way for new growth, the fires of your life might be preparing you for something new and better?

Paul’s words for us today draw a sharp line between what we perceive and what is true. For the Corinthians, it meant knowing the difference between false teaching and teaching from Scripture. They were struggling under the influence of people who were discrediting Paul and the Gospel by saying he was only preaching for his own profit, which was a clever but insidious lie. If Paul was only teaching the Corinthians for money, then how could they trust anything he had to say? It’s such a serious issue that it caused Paul to write this letter specifically to address it.

But how could Paul hope to counter these false teachers who were doing so much damage to his work and to the Church? He couldn’t point to his past - he had spent much of his young life persecuting the Christian church. It was going to be his word against theirs, or at least that’s how it appeared. It probably would have been easier to just give up in the face of such difficult opposition.

Who could blame him? Haven’t you ever felt like giving up when the odds are against you? Sometimes the hits just seem to keep on coming, piling up into a mountain that looks impossible to overcome, until it brings you to your knees. Maybe it feels like you just got caught up on all your payments, but the notices just don’t stop coming in

from the bank, the credit card, the car loan, and on and on and on. And of course, it's the middle of a pandemic, so you haven't worked a full shift in over a month. And on top of that, you're still worried about your friend who's been putting off surgery because they have nowhere to go, your family isn't giving you a single second of "alone time," and you're *this close* to having a mental breakdown.

This sinful world works hard to bring us down. Ever since God's perfect creation was first corrupted by sin, this world has been full of pain, disease, and death. At times it can feel like this life is a lost cause - there are so many problems surrounding us that look impossible to overcome it might seem easier to just give up. Paul had plenty of reason to feel like surrendering to his opposition, but instead, he perseveres. He shows us how, in the midst of the troubles we face in our lives, God is able to turn our weaknesses into strength.

How is it that Paul is able to recognize that his day-to-day existence in this sinful world is causing him to "waste away," but he still "does not lose heart?" Paul experienced incredible hardships in his life, but how can he dismiss them as "light and momentary troubles?" Paul can do these things because he is holding on to a sure hope founded on a beautiful truth - the same truth that we hold on to in the midst of our own difficulties - that we will rise from the dead just like Jesus did.

Maybe at first it doesn't seem possible to just dismiss suffering simply because Jesus rose from the dead. But look at it this way; the most important battle has already been won. No matter what else happens, Jesus has already overcome this world, and we get to receive the benefits of that victory. We can call ourselves winners, even if sometimes we look like losers in the eyes of the world.

Isn't that the perfect comparison? Isn't that exactly how Jesus won the fight for us in the first place? Even though he was God, worthy of the honor and praise of all creation, he humbled himself and became a human being. He lived a human life, subject to the Law. He was abandoned by his friends, suffered painful punishment at the hands of the authorities, and died a humiliating death on a cross - by all accounts, a loser!

But Jesus didn't suffer all those things without a purpose - he did it all for you. His perfect sacrifice paid for the sins of this whole sinful world, so that God's name would be glorified. And that purpose came with a promise, that everyone who believes in Him will rise from the dead, just like he did. This promise is for you, too! In fact, it's for everyone who receives the gift of faith through the Holy Spirit when God's Word is preached to them.

And so, because Jesus endured trials and suffering while here on Earth, we have the sure hope of an eternity in heaven - compared to that awesome gift, everything in this world just seems small and insignificant. Even our own troubles and trials, whatever they may be, fade in the eternal light of heaven's glory. It's a promise that outweighs pain, a hope that surpasses heartache. And it's a joy that will last forever, long after this world and all its struggles and hardships have passed away.

When this world tries to surround us with its threatening fires of pain and struggle and loss, it's easy to lose sight of hope amongst the flames. But through Paul, God tells us that even the destructive troubles of this world have a purpose - to turn our eyes

away from the temporary things of this world and towards the eternal glories of heaven. Just like a lodgepole pine cone only spreads its seeds after being tested by fire, a Christian only comes to fully long for the joys of heaven when they have been tested by the trials of life in this sinful world.

Change is a scary thing, especially when it's wrapped up in something as powerful and dangerous as fire. But even in the midst of something destructive, there can be a beautiful design at work - the forest grows back fuller and healthier than it was before it was burned. We have much more than the hope of green grass and new trees, we have the sure hope of a glorious eternity in heaven with our Savior, because he lived, died, and rose again for us. Face the fires of your life's troubles without fear - they can only prepare you for the glories to come! Amen.