

Calling Down Fire from Heaven

Being Unoffendable Series, January 27& 28, 2024 | Luke 9:51-56

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Have you ever wished you could call down fire from heaven?

When I was a child, I dreamed about being a superhero.

If you saw me as a little boy playing in my back yard, you would probably have seen me with a cape on my back either in reality or in my imagination.

In my mind, I was fighting bad guys using my superpowers.

Of course, growing up, I dreamed of flying.

One other superpower I dreamed of, though, was shooting fireballs out of my hands.

When I was shooting fireballs, I was probably a little bit like Oprah handing out her favorite things, "You get a fireball! You get a fireball!" Bad guys got fireballs from heaven.

What makes you want to call down fire from heaven?

People who hog armrests on airplanes make me want to call down fire from heaven.

It's probably good that I don't get to make the decision about who gets fire from heaven because, if you are an armrest hog on an airplane, I would call down fire from heaven on you.

What makes you want to call down fire from heaven?

Is it someone who says ugly things about you on social media?

Is it a colleague who does things to damage your reputation?

Is it someone who disagrees with you politically?

Is it someone (or something) that has harmed you or your children?

What makes you want to call down fire from heaven?

Columnist and commentator David Brooks described us as a nation of "Vulnerable Narcissists."¹

He noted that people in our society are increasingly lonely. We are making friends, joining groups, and even marrying in smaller and smaller percentages.

Loneliness has led us to be sad. We are more depressed and anxious than ever.

Alone and at home, we increasingly focus on ourselves. We make our own plans and decide what's right and wrong. There is nothing transcendent to give us meaning or morality.

Instead, we turn to tribes, tribalism, and tribal warfare for meaning. We band together with people who share our opinions. We espouse opinions on social media, join political parties, and embrace niche identities. Then we say, "These are my people!" Everyone who is in my tribe is good, and everyone who is out of my tribe is bad, and we go to war.

But these tribes aren't really places where we belong. Instead, they are just collections of disconnected individuals.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>

David Brooks points out that this world leaves us more fragile than ever. We are easily hurt, less resilient, and likely to lose hope. We are “vulnerable narcissists.”

Let’s be honest. We are frequently and easily offended.

Sometimes we are offended for the right reasons, but sometimes it’s for wrong ones.

What should we do with our offense?

What did Jesus do when he was given offense?

What did Jesus demand that his disciples do when they were offended?

It seems like a very important question for us to ask and answer together.

Jesus was offended.

Jesus had already accepted and embraced offense when he “set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

It was time. Jesus’ ministry had come to a turning point.

To say that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” is to say that he was resolutely heading toward the city of Jerusalem, even though the journey would be long and winding.

To say that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” is also to say that Jesus embraced everything that would happen there. He would be rejected. He would suffer, die, rise again, and ascend to heaven to be with his Father. To say that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” is to say that he accepted it all, including rejection and offense. He knew what was coming.

Jesus had already identified where the offense would come from.

The Jewish religious establishment would reject him.

In **Luke 9:22**, Jesus said,

“... The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

The whole Jerusalem establishment would reject him. How offensive!

And yet, if you’ve read the Gospels, you’re not too surprised.

Since the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he had been hounded and rejected by the Pharisees. And he was fully aware that the priests and leaders in Jerusalem would ultimately do so as well.

However, rejection by the Samaritans points out that sometimes offense comes from surprising places.

Jesus was in Galilee to the north, making his way to Jerusalem in the south.

The quickest route was through Samaria. However, the Jews and the Samaritans did not have friendly relationships with each other.

They didn’t like each other. Their differences were ethnic, religious, and historic.

Most Jews who travelled to Jerusalem took a longer route and bypassed Samaria.

Jesus chose to go through Samaria. So, he sent messengers ahead of him to prepare the way.

However, the people of the town Jesus had in view rejected Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. They didn’t want him in their town.

That's surprising because Samaritans may have been bad guys in the mind of the Jews, but they were almost always the good guys when it came to faith in Jesus.

In Luke 10, Jesus told a story about a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and was attacked by robbers, beaten, and left for dead by the side of the road. Along came a priest and then a Levite, members of the Jerusalem establishment. They both left the wounded man alone to fend for himself. Then along came a Samaritan. We know him as "the Good Samaritan" because he took care of the wounded man. Jesus told the crowd to be like him.

In Luke 17, Jesus healed ten people who were sick with leprosy. The healed lepers all went away in joy to resume their old lives. Only one came back to thank Jesus, and that one was a Samaritan. In the Gospel according to Luke, Samaritans are frequently very open to Jesus.

In the book of Acts, written by Luke, there was an early awakening of faith in Jesus in Samaria.

In the New Testament, Samaritans are frequently the ones who respond favorably to Jesus.

But here, a town of Samaritans surprisingly rejected Jesus. They gave offense.

Rejection and offense are both part of following Jesus.

Sometimes we are not surprised. There are certain people we expect to reject Jesus, to reject us, to reject the way of life that Jesus teaches, and even to be hostile to us. We aren't surprised when we are rejected by people we expect to reject us, oppose us, and be hostile to us.

However, sometimes we are genuinely surprised. There are certain people we think are going to listen to us, hear the Gospel, and live the Jesus way of life. But sometimes the people we expect to listen actually also reject us, oppose us, and are hostile to us.

We don't expect rejection by our families, particularly by our own children. But it happens.

We don't expect "good people" to reject the Gospel and its way of life, but sometimes they do!

We don't expect people who have claimed to be Christians in the past to reject the Gospel, Jesus' way of life, and us, but it does happen!

Rejection when we aren't expecting it can feel even worse. It's painful!

But this passage reminds us that following Jesus involves rejection and offense.

What will we do when we are rejected and offended?

James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven.

James and John came with big egos.

James and John were brothers and among the first disciples Jesus called.

Jesus gave them the nickname "Sons of Thunder."

At one point, they asked Jesus to allow them to sit at his right hand and left hand in the Kingdom of God. That is a request to be Jesus' next-in-command. These guys had big egos.

James and John remembered massive displays of divine power in the past.

For instance, they knew that there was the time when Elijah the prophet confronted messengers from the King of Israel. Elijah told the king's messengers that the king was sick and that he would die from his illness.

When the king heard, he was furious. He sent fifty soldiers with their captain to bring Elijah in to have a "conversation" about this prophecy.

When the soldiers found Elijah, he was sitting on the top of a hill. They summoned him to come down and go with them to see the king.

2 Kings 1:10 tells the story elegantly:

But Elijah answered the captain of fifty, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

When his soldiers did not return, the king sent a second group. They met the same fate.

When the third group of soldiers came for Elijah, they begged for their lives.

James and John knew that God could and would send fire from heaven when people opposed his purposes, rejected his holiness, and offended his messengers.

James and John had seen massive displays of divine power themselves.

Just a few verses earlier, James and John had gone with Jesus up on a mountain. While they were praying together, Jesus was transfigured in front of them.

Jesus' appearance became radiant with heavenly glory.

The voice of God the Father thundered love and approval.

James and John had seen the massive, divine power Jesus possessed.

James and John proposed another massive display of divine power to heal their wounded egos.

They proposed that Jesus allow them, like Elijah, to call down fire from heaven.

To be fair to James and John, it wasn't just about their own wounded egos.

They knew that the Samaritans had rejected Jesus, the Son of God, and his Father.

The Samaritans had rejected salvation, holiness, and righteousness.

The wages for doing so is death. Judgment is real!

The Sons of Thunder had a good reason for wanting to call down fire from heaven.

However, James and John had forgotten Jesus' ethical instructions.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus told his disciples that they were to love their enemies.

In **Luke 6:27-28** Jesus said:

"... Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Jesus didn't tell his followers to call down fire from heaven!

James and John had forgotten Jesus' ethical instructions!

James and John also had forgotten Jesus' ministry training.

At the beginning of Luke chapter 9, Jesus called together his twelve core disciples.

He gave them authority and calling to teach, heal, and cast out demons.

Then he sent them out on their own ministry trips with instructions.

They were to go to towns and villages and do their work.

They were to stay where they were welcomed and work.

But they were to shake the dust off their feet and leave places that rejected them. In **Luke 9:5** Jesus told them:

“And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.”

How quickly they forgot Jesus’ ministry training!

When Jesus was rejected and offended, James and John came to Jesus eager to call down fire from heaven. They were ready! But Jesus rebuked them.

Then Jesus did what he had instructed them to do. He left that village and went on to the next.

Instead of calling down fire from heaven, Jesus practiced the strength of silence.

Jesus knew his purpose.

Jesus announced his purpose when he appeared in the synagogue in Nazareth.

Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet in **Luke 4:18-19**:

***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor ...
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”***

Here Jesus says that he has come to proclaim salvation.

Jesus knew the season.

This is the season, the era, or the age of the Church.

During this age, God is patiently offering salvation to the world.

In **2 Peter 3:9** we read about God’s purpose and his forbearance:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

It’s not that God’s holiness doesn’t matter or that there isn’t a time for judgment.

2 Peter 3:10 adds:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

That day is coming, but this is not that day.

Jesus knew the season, and it was not the season for calling down fire from heaven.

Jesus knew his identity.

Isaiah the prophet told us what to expect to see in him.

Isaiah 53:7 described who Jesus would be:

***He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.***

As Jesus stood before the high priest offended, accused, and on trial, he was mostly silent.

Similarly, as Jesus stood before Pilate, offended, accused, and on trial, he was silent.

Everyone was amazed at him.

Jesus was like a lamb, silent before his accusers.

That's real strength. Jesus practiced the strength of silence when offended.

Jesus knew what to say.

On the cross in **Luke 23:34** as he died, Jesus modelled how to think about enemies who reject us now, during the age when the offer of salvation and the call to grace is paramount:

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. ..."

That's real strength. Jesus practiced the strength of silence when offended.

This is incredibly Good News to you and me.

We like to think of ourselves as the offended, as the ones who have been offended.

We forget that we are also those who have offended. We have offended God! We have rejected him and sinned against him. We have offended God.

So, the fact that Jesus is not calling down fire from heaven on the guilty is good news to us!

Instead, Jesus suffered our offense.

He took our offense on his shoulders.

He died in our place to pay the price for our offense.

He rose again from the dead, victorious over offense and rejection.

And he has offered us forgiveness for our offense. Isn't that wonderful news! And it comes with a calling on us...

Instead of calling down fire from heaven, let's practice the strength of silence.

Braver Angels practices the strength of silence.

Braver Angels tries to bridge the political divide in this country.

It doesn't seek to bring agreement or unanimity; it seeks to de-escalate the heat of rhetoric and the animosity that people on opposite sides of the political divide have for one another.

Braver Angels brings together people with diametrically opposed views.

Before they put them together in the same room, Braver Angels has participants practice some of the strength of silence.

Before talking with or to one another, they think and talk apart.

Apart, people of the same political persuasion ask the question, "What unflattering things does the other side believe about me that are not true?" Then they are asked what is true instead.

Then, still apart, they are asked, "What stereotypes are at least a little bit true?"

These are all disciplines of silence and assessments people are making of themselves and of the real situation before dialogue even begins.²

² https://www.wsj.com/politics/meet-the-americans-trying-to-lower-the-temperature-in-politics-062086eb?st=vsv5bitjeprp264&refl ink=article_email_share

Stephen, a later disciple of Jesus, finally imitated Jesus and practiced the strength of silence.

Stephen was a leader in the early church.

He was put on trial before the Jerusalem establishment for following and preaching Jesus.

He gave a bold defense of his faith and explanation of the Gospel.

At the end, they grabbed him, took him outside of the city, and began to stone him to death.

That's when Stephen practiced the strength of silence just as Jesus had done. **Acts 7:60** says:

And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Silence takes real strength.

Anger is easy. Calling down fire from heaven is easy.

Silence requires loving God more than we love our reputations.

Silence requires loving people more than we love being right or speaking our minds.

Silence takes real strength.

Let's practice the strength of silence.

God the Son expects the strength of silence from us.

God the Holy Spirit makes the strength of silence possible in us.

God the Father honors the strength of silence.

When offended, let's practice the strength of silence.