



# Holy Spirit #9

## Leading and Purifying (Wind and Fire)

w/c 30 June 2024

*"Solitude is the place of purification and transformation, the place of the great struggle and the great encounter." (Henri Nouwen)*

### Read Exodus 13:17–22 and Hebrews 12:1–3, 18–24, 28–29

In our four themes this week, I will try to look at each individually but also see how they impact the others.

**Leading** requires others to follow. God, through his Spirit, goes where we need to go. Reflecting on our first passage today, we could say that in terms of guidance at least, the Israelites of the Exodus had it easy. Something obvious to follow – a pillar looking like a cloud by day but the fire within shining out at night. If it moves, you move; if it stays put you do too. There are no such pillars today – nor are the Spirit's methods quite that lacking in subtlety. How can we find out our path ahead today? Why might it not be such a good idea if we all our own pillar of fire and cloud running around in front of us today?

It has been said that the only way to cross a field in a straight line is to fix your eyes on something on the other side. If you look at your feet, you'll go round in circles. How can we apply such thinking in our life together as the church here?

**Purification** appears to be something both for us to do and yet also something done for/to us. See for example, 2 Corinthians 7:1 and 1 John 1:9. The Greek is the same in both. Though note that in the latter the purification does depend on something we have to do first. See also 1 John 3:3.

An idea linked quite closely in the Bible with purification is that of refining. One of the more well known (or perhaps well sung) passages (Malachi 3:2–4) spells out the need for fire to purify. Paul (1 Corinthians 3:10–15) outlines something similar as dross will be consumed leaving only what is of worth behind. Take a moment to reflect on Henri Nowen's words at the top of this page. How can we find that place in what may be crowded lives today?

**Wind** is, biblically, a simple synonym for spirit (both the Hebrew *ru'ach* and Greek *pneuma* equally carry both meanings; and that of 'breath' as well. In our context today, the question may simply be, '*Where is the wind blowing us?*' Take a moment to remember times you have experienced a truly strong wind – leaning back as its sheer force supports you. How might we do that when the wind is the very breath of God? Also, how can we balance this with the injunction to 'run' from Hebrews 12:2

The **Fire** of refining is required for that aspect of purification. Refining fire is perhaps an image we miss today if our only encounter with real live fire tends to be images of the destructive force of a wildfire that we might see on the television news. Fire is also an image used of God himself – Deuteronomy 4:24 and quoted later by the writer of Hebrews. The importance and symbolism of fire in Old Testament worship can be gauged from the command that the fire on the altar within the Temple must never go out – Leviticus 6:12–13. How should our exposure to the fire of God change us and change what we think, say and do?

Taken together, these all feel a little like a recipe for pilgrimage: company, purpose, direction. And as to our destination? We can find that in our second reading (verses 22–24) – the City of Zion. A place where, in one sense, we have (as the writer describes) already come and yet also the hoped-for, endpoint of our journey – see Hebrews 13:14 and Revelation 21:2. How do we – individually and collectively – maintain that sense of forward momentum, of journeying, of pilgrimage in our Christian life?

*"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." (Antoine de Saint-Exupery)*