

Question: Why did Jesus say He came “to bring fire on the earth” (Luke 12:49)?

Answer: In Luke 12:49 Jesus said, “have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!” Scholars have interpreted Jesus’ words differently, and all agree that it is hard to know precisely what He had in mind here.

Some scholars point out that in the Old Testament fire often symbolized judgment. This has led some to conclude that when Jesus said, “I have come to bring fire on the earth” (NET), He was saying He would bring judgment to the earth. This would fit with John 9:39 where Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world.”

Other scholars relate the fire to the Holy Spirit. Recall that John the Baptist had prophesied that when Jesus came He would baptize “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16). Later, when the baptism of the Holy Spirit first occurred on the Day of Pentecost, the people saw “what seemed to be tongues of fire” that came on those filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).

Still other scholars relate the fire to Jesus’ work on the cross. The cross was the central focus of all His activities, and all that He did during His three-year ministry pointed toward this momentous event. When Jesus said, “how I wish it were already kindled,” perhaps He was expressing His yearning to bring this task to fulfillment.

And still other scholars suggest a variation of the above. They say that when Jesus said He came to bring fire on the earth, He was talking about bringing judgment—not the judgment of others but rather His own judgment. It is a judgment that the Messiah will bear for others, not one He will inflict on others.

My personal view is that the “fire” is probably a reference to the tremendous power of God wrought on the earth through Jesus’ miraculous ministry and continued in the Book of Acts through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, which He sent to earth following His ascension into heaven (John 15:26).