

Fire Lighters (Larry Crabb)

Isa 50:10-11

Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant?

Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.

But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze.

This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.

There is an enormous difference between the joy of discovery and the need to explain. The former gives life a sense of adventure. The latter makes us hate mystery. God has created the world with an orderly structure that can be reasonably, investigated and profitably used. The job of science is to understand and order as fully as possible. But behind the structure is a person, a free, unmanageable person who is bound to nothing outside himself. It is therefore impossible to reduce all mystery to understandable categories. Some level of confusion must remain. If we trust the person behind the structure, that confusion becomes a source of adventure. If we don't trust him, we hate the confusion and try to get rid of it.

For those who enjoy discovery because they know a good God is moving through the chaos toward a wonderful conclusion, mystery poses no problem. It is welcomed. Explain what you can, and relax even when you can't. But for those ruled by a passion to explain, for those who insist on feeling confident in their own plans, mystery is offensive. They want to know exactly what they must do to provide for their economic future, to restore harmony in their relationships, to succeed in their career or ministry. Confusion is an enemy. Certainty is a challenge to overcome. God's words through Isaiah tell us one way we can know if we are living in the flesh or in the Spirit. When we bump into something we can't explain, when we find ourselves in a dark tunnel and aren't sure how to get out, is our stronger impulse to trust God or figure out what to do? Do we quickly reach for a flashlight to help us see the road ahead? Or do we firmly grasp the hand of the only one who can see in the dark? Where is our confidence---in God or in our ability to come up with a good plan? If we walk confidently in the light of our own torches, Isaiah informs us that we are not relying on God. The demand to walk a path with a predictable outcome is an urge of the flesh. It needs to die. Fire lighters love formulas. They live by them. When they can't devise their own, they turn to experts who confidently tell them what to do to achieve desired results. When fire lighters try to help people, they are more concerned with doing it right than touching others' souls. They trust their model for helping more than the voice of God, more than the Spirit speaking through his Word into their redeemed hearts. Connecting is replaced by control. Fire lighters work too hard. They follow theory too closely; they depend too much on approved technique. When our sons were in their early teens, I remember spending several hours one evening writing out my analysis of where they were in their development, determining what they needed to successfully move through the sociopsychological demands of that stage, and planning how I could best help them. A few years later, when Kep was in the middle of his rebellion, I screamed at God, literally: "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it. Just tell me what to do!" When he refused (I'm not sure what I thought he ought to have done), I consulted an adolescent specialist-- actually two of them. "What should I do?" I demanded. "Do I

ground him, sell his car, and require attendance at youth group? Or do I calmly discuss things with him, share my concerns, and reasonably explore options?" Since God didn't answer those questions in the book he wrote, I lost interest in reading my Bible.

Interesting how we prefer to see the Bible as a rule book, a collection of principles to follow when life gets rough, rather than as a revelation of God's heart. We prefer instructions on what to do over all invitation to connect our hearts with his and to then do whatever he reveals.

Fire lighters hate uncertainty,. They are terrified of confusion. Their nagging question is always: "Am I right?" Am I doing this properly? Am I making big mistakes? Is there a better way of handling this situation? Who would know that might tell me? Fire lighters demand clear answers, practical instructions, and doable solutions. Life is livable if they can feel confident in their plans. So they insist on good plans and often find them in the Bible, not always because the plans are there, but because they want them to be there.

Parents of young children are especially prone to fire lighting. When they get together for mutual support, open sharing, prayer, Bible study, and discussion of good books on parenting, it can be a wonderful thing. But sometimes they gather in groups to intensely discuss the latest Christian manual on raising kids. If someone questions the approved text too strongly, the group's welcome is withdrawn. The parents' terror of confusion is covered over with an almost slavish confidence in what the experts recommend.

To sustain then confidence, they stick together. They report successes, affirm each others' faith when things don't work as hoped, and chide one another for lapses in following the plan. With a common flashlight illuminating the way, these scared people connect, falsely. Cultlike elements develop in their community. Agreement and conformity are more valued than debate and diversity, and all happen in the name of biblical truth. The passion to be right and their consensus on what is right becomes the foundation of their closeness. But that passion and the question it inevitably spawns--- Am I right?--come out of the flesh. The demand to be right, an insistence that we find confidence in a strategy because of its guaranteed outcome, is an urge to be killed. It must die because it replaces a final trust in God with confidence in a system we can follow.

God dealt with one expression of my fire-lighting passion the way he often does, by deepening the darkness. He allowed my confusion to get so thick that I was faced with only two options: Trust God or sink into despair. The darkness he permitted shattered my confidence in what I was doing and removed all hope of regaining confidence through a better plan.

During Kep's rebellion, not only did I write out a game plan for helping both Kep and Ken move through their developmental stages, but I also studied biblical stories to see what worked and what didn't (I spent hours in 1 Samuel 2 pondering Eli's failure with his two sons, Hophni and Phineas). I read books by the reigning experts, and I prayed and fasted.

Because my core agenda was to be right and know it, I could richly connect with no one. I was pouring very little into my wife, my sons, or my friends. I remained involved with them, often very kindly, but my core struggle was to be right, not to touch something good in another with whatever was spiritually alive in me.

The darkness deepened. God gave little opportunity for me to be confirmed that I was right. I became more confused. I fought the confusion; I hated it as all fire lighters do. Then I received word that Kep had been expelled from college. Something became clear. There were no formulas. There were no right strategies with guaranteed outcomes. There was only God. Would I trust him and rely on his name (not as a new plan to get what I wanted)? Would I simply hold his hand, trust his heart, and move into the

darkness with no purpose other than to reflect something of Christ? Only deep darkness helped me to tear God more than confusion.

When the lights go out, when our dreams shatter and there's no way to piece them back together, that's when our questions are most likely to change. No longer do we ask, "Am I right?" We realize we can't be right enough to make things happen as we want. Instead we ask, "Whom do I trust?"

The passion to explain leads us along a path that ends badly. According to Isaiah, we end up lying down in torment, wracked by unanswerable questions: Why didn't this work? What could I have done differently? Why am I so stupid? Why did I ever listen to that expert? How can I possibly climb out of this hole? It's so deep----and dark.

But when the passion to be right is mortified, a new one arises: a longing to trust God. And that urge takes us on a sometimes bumpy and steep path that winds through some very dark nights but eventually brings us to green pastures. There we lie down, and rest. And that's a guarantee.