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### **Habakkuk 3:4, World English Bible.**

*<sup>4</sup>His splendor is like the sunrise.  
Rays shine from his hand, where his power is hidden.*

### **Through a tunnel of fire.**

In the Bible, fire is used heavily as a metaphor. Fire symbolizes the presence and the guidance of God, as when Moses finds God in a burning bush at the onset of the Exodus, and when God leads his people in the desert as a pillar of fire. Fire also represents the power and inspiration of God; the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles as flames of fire in Acts. God's judgement against those who defy him is pictured as fire in Revelation. Fire is used in Old Testament sacrifices, when the People of God make offerings of grain and animals; they burn their offerings because in this way, only God can make use of them. God's people are said to be refined through fire in the Book of Malachi when they undergo moral and physical trials. Notice that when God is fire, fire does not destroy people who are good. In Isaiah, God declares this to people who have been redeemed:

*<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,*

*and the flame shall not consume you.*

Water is also used in the Bible as a powerful symbol of God's presence or actions. Consider this from Genesis, Chapter 1, the second verse of the Bible:

*<sup>2</sup>The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*

We see that water has a special place in God's heart: his spirit, which in the New Testament we call the Holy Spirit, hovers above water when the world is created.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink;*" he speaks of his powers of forgiveness and redemption as a sort of

soothing water. Jeremiah in the second chapter of the book, speaks for God:

*<sup>18</sup> And now what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile?  
Or what do you gain by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates?*

The waters of these two rivers are being equated with people who are not of God, and we see that God divides good and evil people by comparing them to good and evil waters. Most powerfully, water is used as a symbol of salvation and eternal life in the Kingdom of God; this metaphor appears multiple times in the Bible. We all know of the woman at the well to whom Jesus speaks. He tells her that the water she is drawing will only quench people's thirst for a bit, but his healing waters will give us eternal joy. Water is also used heavily to represent God's

cleansing abilities through ritualistic physical cleansings. John the Baptist uses the water of the Jordan to do this. And in Ezekiel 36, God says this to the House of Israel through the prophet: *"<sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you."*

Other worldly and celestial phenomena, like stars, are used heavily as metaphors and powerful symbols in the Bible. The Hebrew word in the Bible for star is *"kokab"*. In the Book of Job, Job is brutalized by the Devil with God's permission, and yet he maintains his full faith in God. A friend of Job who is attempting to console Job declares: *"Is not God high in the heavens? See the highest stars, how lofty they are!* Ancient people did not know what the stars were, but they were brilliant at night, and they seemed to be infinitely high in the sky – yet God was higher than the highest stars. Jesus the Messiah's arrival on Earth as a baby is heralded by the appearance of a brilliant star. This is Matthew 2:2, with the Wise Men speaking: *"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

This is just a handful of the many, many examples of natural phenomena being used in the Bible to signify the presence, power, protection, guidance, and eternal nature of God. There is a reason for the Bible being so filled with

metaphors relating to God and rooted in nature. It's not because at one time God chose to communicate his nature through nature. It's because God has always done this – and he still does it now. We're just not listening.

When I was in high school, I lived in an area now called Santa Clarita, on the edge of the Mojave Desert. Back when I was there, it was only lightly populated, and yes, in the summer it was well over a hundred degrees. The closest Catholic School my parents could find was some number of miles south, in the San Fernando Valley, in the greater LA area. So, I drove my 1965 Pontiac GTO every day to school. I had to go out of the desert, up over some hills, and down into the Valley. The drive, at first, was actually quite easy: I passed above these hills using a highly elevated freeway, which at the time was brand new. Then, one day, there was an earthquake and the entire elevated freeway system fell to the ground. For the rest of high school, I drove on the hills themselves on a quickly built, temporary, narrow road. One day, when I was 16, as I came up over a rise, there was a brush fire in front of me. At first it didn't bother me, but then a howling wind suddenly swept the fire right up to the side of the road. Then, in an instant, the fire shot up over the road to the other side, creating a tunnel of fire. I had just an instant to decide if I should hit the brakes and turn around or go

straight ahead. I looked in my rearview mirror and saw that the fire was behind me now. On impulse, I floored it and shot into the tunnel.

The people of the Bible lived in a radically simpler world than ours. They didn't know what stars were. The Earth seemed to be the center of reality. They didn't know the difference between a star and a planet that was reflecting the sun's light. It is thought by modern researchers that perhaps the Christmas star was the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus. They didn't know what caused the wind or the waves of the ocean or lightning. When they looked out at the world, they didn't see tall buildings and highways and power lines. Only soldiers rode horses: regular people walked or maybe rode donkeys. They saw the world as an amazing, mysterious place that certainly only God could have made. Imagine if they had realized that there are a trillion or so galaxies in what we can identify as the universe today, with 200 billion stars in our galaxy, and with each star being a sun in itself. Just how powerful would God have seemed then? Still, even with their extremely limited view, because they were not blinded by the creations of people, they knew that God was speaking to them with the elements of nature that surrounded them. We've taken the power of natural elements and removed their sacred meanings. We tell ourselves that we will one day fully understand all

of nature, and that in the meantime, we will incrementally conquer it. As a result, we are not seeing and hearing God speaking to us.

Habakkuk was one of the latter prophets of the Old Testament. He lived in the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. He knew that God is just, and therefore, the righteous can count on being vindicated in the end. Evil people can count on perpetual, divine punishment. As a prophet, he listened to God and passed on the words of God to the People of God. The Book of Habakkuk is a prophesy for people caught in a waiting period. God will fulfill his promises, but we must wait, be patient, trust God, and know that God will speak to us when the time is right. We simply need to be listening when God does speak. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter Habakkuk he prophesizes:

*<sup>4</sup> His splendor is like the sunrise.*

*Rays shine from his hand, where his power is hidden.*

The Sun was the most powerful thing that the ancients could see. It gave them the day, light, and heat. Without the sun, there was no food, nothing other than darkness. God caused it to appear over the horizon in the morning and God took it away at night – but God always returned the sun again, the next morning. God controls the sun for us, giving us the necessary day for work and the night for rest, and in fact, God orchestrates the entire universe for us.

The tunnel of fire that I drove into at about ninety miles an hour was not very long. I barely entered it before I saw the end. I drove through, and only for a moment was there fire all around me. I drove the rest of the way to school, with my car going thumpity-thump because I had partly melted the tires. When I pulled into my school's parking lot, I discovered that my metallic gold paint was singed as well. Luckily, my father ran a tire shop and garage, and he had a buddy who owned a body shop.

When I walked into my first class, Religion, feeling a little shaken, the lesson was on the transfiguration of Christ from Matthew 17. The discussion was about the symbolism in this passage:

*his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.* <sup>3</sup> *And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.* <sup>4</sup> *And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."* <sup>5</sup> *He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."* <sup>6</sup> *When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.* <sup>7</sup> *But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear."* <sup>8</sup> *And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.*

This happens right after Jesus reveals that he is the Christ, the Messiah, and that he will be put to death. Jesus is moving from a teacher in the Galilee to a crucified son of God in Jerusalem. Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John up the mountain. Although it is not stated in the Gospel, it is believed

that this incident took place on Mount Hermon. This transformation in his mission is mirrored in the transfiguration: Jesus now shines like the sun and his clothes are like the light emanating from the sun. Moses and Elijah, two prophets from the Old Testament, appear. Then Moses is quoted: <sup>5</sup> *While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"* The symbolism is obvious: the sun and the reference to the Old Testament, where the Messiah from Bethlehem was first promised.

While everyone was talking about the symbolism in the Transfiguration scene, I was thinking about the tunnel of fire I had just driven through. It wasn't that dangerous, and it only lasted a few seconds. The Transfiguration wasn't about fire, but it was about the Sun, which doesn't literally burn because it creates nuclear fusion, as if it were a massive hydrogen bomb. But that was close enough for me. The brief tunnel of fire and the lesson the transfiguration together were meant to get my attention. The message was simple: God was there for me. I floated through the rest of the school day, drove home through the burned brush, and descended into the desert. When my dad came home hours later, after dark, after having worked perhaps twelve hours, I told him what



happened to my car – but not what had happened to me. He said he was glad I was okay, and that he would get my fixed.

There is a special reason why biblical literature is filled with images of light, sun, fire, wind, water, and other natural phenomena, and why they are so closely associated with God. The writers of the Bible - and probably hundreds of people contributed to its content - and it took about a millennium and a half to write - wanted to remind the readers who would come later that God was constantly speaking to them through God's creations. The Scripture authors wanted God's people to be constantly listening and watching for God so that they would keep God on their minds. We need to read the Bible, to learn what to look for, to learn the meaning of what we see, and we need to always be watching for God to make an appearance in our lives. If you think you see God communicating with you in a brilliant pink sunrise or flock of hundreds of geese landing on a pond, don't conclude that you are crazy.

There have been a handful of other times in my life when I have seen God in God's creations. But I imagine that for every one that I have recognized, I have missed ten or a hundred. One of the most important reasons to read the Bible is to let God teach you what to look for. Read about the Prophets, the Apostles, the People of Israel, the folks who didn't have to look past office buildings and strip

malls, through packed parking lots, and around cell towers. It was easier for them. Perhaps God knew that we would be cluttering up our world, that we would fill it with countless human-made things that supposedly entertain and help us - but in reality, simply distract us. So, we have been given a Bible full of references to nature and the keys to seeing God in what is hidden underneath and just behind all the stuff we make.

But now that I have worked so hard to sell you on the spirituality of the natural world, I have one more thing to say. Yes, I believe that the very reason we are programmed from birth to be amazed by the beauty of what is around us is so that we see God in God's creations. But I met someone who has a different perspective. He's a little younger than me and grew up on the east coast. He sees God in things that come out of nowhere and grab his attention. And since he lives in a very dense city, this often involves human made stuff. Recently, a neighbor of his parked on a slight hill in front of his apartment building and apparently didn't put the emergency brake on. All the man I met knew was that he was walking along the sidewalk, his mind focused on nothing, and just as he turned to enter his very tall building, he heard and felt a huge explosion of metal and glass as his neighbor's car plowed into another parked car. He spun around, and he instantly knew that God was getting his attention. This caused him to pay

close attention to God, at least for the rest of the day. Instead of going home and eating dinner in front of his TV as usual, he ate dinner while listening to a recorded version of the Book of Romans. Please pray with me.

*God, reach out to us. Help us see and hear the signs that the people of the Bible witnessed. Bring us the same joy that was felt by the very first people who learned to live by your ways and to walk in your Kingdom. Amen.*