

A group of pioneers were traveling across the vast prairie of the American Midwest. They were in search of land, a new start, with a sense of adventure. Their wagon train was moving slowly across the open fields of amber grain. Tall grasses, dried by the summer heat, swayed softly in an afternoon breeze. Despite the hot sun, the horses, oxen, wagons, people, and kids were making fairly good progress.

Then they noticed the smoke. In the distance something was not right. A rider was sent out to investigate. In a few moments he came galloping back to the wagon train. "Fire!" was all he yelled out as he came closer. "Fire!"

It was a prairie fire- a huge one. Fueled by the dry grasses and pushed along by the breeze, the fire had spread out for miles and was heading straight towards the wagons. There would be no way to outrun the blaze. No way to get out of its way. No way to put it out. The people and animals were trapped, and the flaming death would soon, very soon, swallow them up.

But someone knew what to do. There was a way to escape. "Quick," the leader of the group called, "Start another fire. Do it back there, where we just came from." The objection came even quicker. "What did you say? What do you want us to do? Start another fire? Are you crazy?"

But this was not a time for objections. It was a time for action. And the leader took charge. "Light it now! It's our only chance! Do it!" With that the fire behind them was started. Now things really looked bad. Fire in front of them. Fire behind them. They were caught in the middle.

Then the leader explained. "See, the fire we started is being pushed away from us by the wind. Soon all that will be left is burnt ground. We'll wait until it cools off a bit and then move everything there. When the other fire gets here, it'll go around us because our fire will have already burned up the grass. There won't be anything left for it to burn, and we'll be safe."

And that's what happened. When the huge prairie fire arrived, it was scary. Flames all around. Smoke filled the air. But the wagon train was safe. As long as everyone stayed on the ground where the fire had already

burned, the fire couldn't reach them. And when it was over, they were alive. They could move forward toward the new life they longed for.

Now let's compare this to **our** promised land. Eternal life in heaven is **our** destination. Through this life, we're pioneers, striking out with hope, with anticipation, with even a sense of adventure, as we move forward to that new and better place **we're** going to live in forever.

We're not alone in this journey. We're in it together. The church with all its people, young and old, strong and weak, of all colors and backgrounds, makes up this wagon train called the Christian church. One person, all alone, couldn't make it. It's doubtful that even a family by itself could go very far. But together, we're better. We're stronger. There's safety in numbers. There's support, encouragement, and help.

Is there a fire? Yes, the fires of hell! The demonic powers are active and angry. Their hatred rages at us in the church. Then there's the world we live in; it's filled with bitterness and evil. It too wants to swallow us up, burning our faith to a crisp. And there's no way we can save ourselves from these wicked powers. We can't outrun them. We can't put them out. We can't get away from them.

But Someone knows the way of escape. His name is Jesus. And we all know how He took on the fires of hell. On a cross. On Calvary. On Good Friday. The fires raged. Jesus suffered. The fury of hell attacked, and Jesus died. The world did its worst to Him, and Jesus gave His life for us.

Now there is a safe spot for us to stand. The ground we walk on is protected by the Savior. The gates of hell cannot prevail against Him. So, when we entrust our lives to Jesus, the fires of Satan cannot touch us. The evil of this world cannot destroy us.

But still they flame, all around us. Just like the wagon train with smoke filling the air and fire surrounding it, we're in the midst of danger and death. You can see it all around us. Over there are false teachers are trying to convince us that Jesus isn't all that important. You can hear their lies calling out to you. "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're trying your best." "There are lots of ways to get to God; just pick one that works for you." "Look within yourself. All you need is you. You can do it." But they're lies. All of them. They leave Jesus out. And when

you leave Jesus, His cross, His forgiveness, out, then it's fire time, and you get burned. You get swallowed up by the lies.

Over there the fire looks so alluring, so attractive. The passion burns. The sexuality is tempting. You can see what awaits you, and the message is clear. "Don't be such a prude. Waiting until you're married and then being committed to just one person in a marriage is so confining, so old fashioned. Get with the times. Live a little." You see it on TV, the movies, the internet, in magazines, everywhere. But it's a lie. Take God's good gift of sex out of the marriage relationship and it's fire time. You get burned. Tempting- yes! But deadly too.

Over there are the flames of violence and hatred, and how those flames were so clearly on display in recent months in cities like Minneapolis, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, and Kenosha. Yet, we know that none of us, anywhere in the world are truly safe and secure from violence and hatred. Yes, the flames of the evil one and of this hate-filled world burn bright for all to see and tragically, for many to suffer.

But there are even more flames: Over there, that flame is greed. It's a simple lie, but one that is so believable. "If I just had a little more money, a little more of this, of that, then everything would be fine." But it's never enough. It's just a smoke screen for the greed that smolders within each of us. Look at the rest of the fire. That section is discontent. It's calling for you to be anything *but* satisfied with the way things are going. There's a flame that's filled with words that hurt and cut down just so we can feel better about ourselves. Hateful anger is over there. Selfishness flares up all the time.

Enough. The flames are all around us, calling to us, attracting us, deceiving us, wanting us. It's dangerous out there, and so easy to get burned by the flames of hell and fires of the sinful world.

But look at the ground we stand on. And here is where the comparison with the wagon train breaks down. It's not blackened, burnt grass. It's not some place scorched over with little life or beauty. Just the opposite. It's teeming with *life, new life!*

You see, Jesus rose from the dead. He's alive. He's with us. And He looks with mercy on His church. This safe haven in the midst of the fires

all around us is filled with wonders beyond compare. Truth. Faith. Prayer. Love. Protection. Glory. Power. Joy. And most wonderful of all, we're seen by God as those without fault because of Jesus.

Yet that's not all. Here in the safety of His church, He gives us each other. Together, we're better. There is safety in numbers. And so, He tells us to be merciful to those who doubt, to those who are being pulled toward the fire He tells us to reach out and snatch anyone who is getting close to those deadly flames.

How? There are three things Jesus wants us to do to keep each other from the flames.

First, build each other up. A kind word. Encouragement when life is difficult. Supportive gifts of love. Help in time of need. Friendship. Very simply, stop looking at the fires out there so much and look at each other. See what needs to be done to keep someone else strong in the faith- and then do it.

Second, pray. Speak from your heart for the needs of someone else. Especially pray that we all stay close to Jesus. Pray that our ears and eyes are turned away from the lies out there and instead are fixed on the truth from the Bible that declares Jesus as all important in this world and for the life to come. Pray for each other. Even, no, **especially** pray for our enemies that they may repent of their sin, know Jesus as we do, and live!

Third, hate what is evil and corrupting. It's hard to stand alone against what's wrong in this world if it looks like everyone else doesn't care. We need each other to say "No, I'm not going to do that either. I'm not going to allow my kids to watch that. Yes, I will do what God wants me to do. Yes, I will be obedient to Him, not giving in so easily to temptations of this world." Hate the evil around.

Yes, we stand in the middle of a great fire. But we're protected. The love and mercy of Jesus will keep us safe. He died. He rose. And the wagon train called the church is on the way to the promised land. As we travel through this dangerous world, build each other up, pray for one another, and hate the evil out there. For one day this journey will be over, and only those on this train led by Jesus will enjoy the power and majesty of God's heavenly nation forever. Amen.

