Outdoor survival intrigues us. It all started with Survivor, the most brutal of game shows mentally and physically. A million dollar prize waits for the one who can outwit, outplay, and outlast all their opponents. Then people like Bear Grylls and Les Stroud found fame from their television shows where they pushed themselves to survive in extreme and remote locations with only their skills and a camera to record it all. The History Channel has now entered into the game with a competitive show of their own boasting a million dollar prize. Simply called “Alone”, it pits survivalists against one another as they are marooned on separate campsite to see who can last the longest. These contestants are allowed one bag of supplies and of course, a case or two of camera equipment to record everything. They then settle in for as many weeks or months as they can muster with winners lasting as long as 100 days! Their only human contact is reduced to the rare visit of the production’s medical team who check each contestant’s weight and vitals. These contestants are experienced and knowledgeable and once they establish a camp site, everyone of them turns their attention to fire.

They know that having a fire is key to their survival. They need to cook food and purify water, they need to keep warm and ward off dangerous wildlife. Of all their precious tools, a flint for starting fires might be the most guarded. If fire cannot be achieved, survival is not possible.

The show has been set in many different locations and terrains. Maybe the most challenging site has been Vancouvoer Island off of Canada’s Pacific Coast. This spot is virtually a cold climate rain forest and as such, a stick of dry wood can be impossible to find. But when smoke starts to swirl, and a flame leaps upward, the survivalists can finally relax for a moment and feel a bit of hope.

Few of us are prone to sign up for such an experience but we will certainly be entertained by it. We like to witness crazy people doing extreme things. But have you ever stopped and asked yourself… “Am I in that category? Am I a crazy person? Am I willing to do extreme things? Am I willing to let God light a fire within my heart?” Or, you could put the question in another way, “Am I willing to let the Holy Spirit dwell within me?”

Every fire shows undeniable evidence of itself and as we look at the work and activity of the Holy Spirit, we will see that he lays out the same pattern of evidence. And once we know what to look for, we can see for ourselves if such evidence exists in our own lives.

To provide our framework, we are going to turn to the words of the apostle Paul starting in 2 Corinthians chapter 2. In this section of his letter Paul is concerned with defending his own ministry to those who doubt him and speak against him. As such, he lays out specific evidence to show that he is indeed a Spirit-filled, legitimate apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul is a fount of information for us on the workings and dealings of the Holy Spirit.

And so we turn to the first evidence of fire: smoke. Where there’s smoke there is fire. If we are far way from a fire, we will see the smoke before we see any flames. If you drive along the road with your windows down you will be able to smell the smoke of any nearby bonfire. It is also very apparent if someone has just gone out for a smoke break. The smell of smoke is undeniable, and it clings to our clothes and hair. In Chapter two verse fifteen Paul writes, READ

So we ask ourselves, “Do I smell? Am I drenched in the aroma of Christ or is it merely dabbed behind my ears?” And notice, the perception. A bonfire smell is a welcome aroma to the family roasting hot dogs on a camping trip. But if you are off to an important meeting you will want to avoid that smokey smell. This is also true of the fragrance of Christ. To those being saved it’s the smell of life…to unbelievers it is the smell of death….the same smell! Perceived in opposite ways! But Paul is adamant here, a Spirit-filled Christian is a smelly one who demonstrated the evidence of smoke.

The next evidence of fire: Light. Every fire produces light. Think back to our Alone contestant trying desperately to start a fire as night begins to fall. Imagine the relief when their efforts begin to produce smoke and finally a flicker of flame! The word for this is glorious. Glorious light! Glorious protection! Paul loves this word glory. Listen to Chapter 3: 7-11 READ

The Holy Spirit within us up to something glorious, something that outshines even the work of Moses! His face shone with the brightness of God’s glory, but his glory was something that faded. We shine with a lasting glory, a light that brings about righteousness. But how does this light bring about righteousness? To answer that, we turn to our third evidence: Transformation.

A fire is never static. It is by it’s very nature a chemical reaction. It is constantly shifting and moving and as it does so the material that it burns is forever changed. A piece of charred wood cannot somehow be washed clean and restored. It is forever marred and scarred even after the fire has been put out. The burning fire brings about transformation in the material that it burns.

2 Corinthians 3:18 READ

So the Spirit that burns brightly in us, also burns to bring about transformation in us. And both the light without and the transformation within are glorious!

The end result? The final evidence of fire? Ash. A fire reduces that which it burns to ash. As far as a bonfire is concerned, a pile of ash is the end goal, it is the final stage, it is the pinnacle of glory! “Really?” you might say, “This is quite the anticlimactic end to a sermon.” That may be true, but, in the Bible, ash is a sign of humility. It was used to express feelings of sadness and mourning…people, especially prophets, would sit on a pile of ash and come before God in a state of humble prayer. Ashes are intrinsically tied to repentance and there inlies the glory of the ash heap. When we repent, sin looses it’s hold upon us. When we repent, we understand our place before God, when we repent, we embrace the glory of the fire within us. Paul puts it this way in 4:5-6 READ.

So yes, the ash heap is the pinnacle of the Holy Spirit’s fire at work within us. It is the Spirit’s end goal to bring us to a place of humility, to a place of servitude to Christ, indeed, a place of glory.

With Paul’s help we are now aware of these evidences of fire: a smokey smell, the fragrance of Christ, the bright light of God’s glory, our continual transformation into what will be our most glorious state, ash. And now as we are aware of these evidences, we can look at ourselves and we can observe… “Am I smokey? Am I a bright light? Am I being transformed? Am I being reduced to ash? Have I been set on fire?” Sometimes it can be hard to evaluate yourself. Some things you can know for sure but other things are tricker to see clearly. But that’s the beauty of evidence…it is apparent to all. Others can see it! So, I want you to be an encouragement to someone else this week. If you see the evidence of fire in someone’s life, let them know! Tell them or write them a note, or send them an email, or however you do it, let that person that you have noticed God’s fire within them. Encourage them to keep on burning!

Now, if you don’t hear from anyone, that does not mean that you’ve been extinguished, but keep pursuing God, keep pressing on and maybe initiate some conversations with those close to you about God’s fire and how it burns in your life and in theirs.

And I will say, if someone comes to mind and you don’t contact them or let them know…well, you might have a problem with your own fire. Don’t push aside this opportunity to encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ. Let’s be willing to share this evidence with one another. Okay? Promise me? Okay, you just made a promise to a pastor in a church…that should about do it.

Well, as the contestants on “Alone” begin their survival journey, they spend every ounce of energy they have in getting a fire going. The damp wood makes the task almost impossible, and every trick in the book must be tried. Some become desperate, but giving up is not an option. Life in their inhospitable surroundings depends upon fire.

God is wanting to start a fire within you. He has the small sticks and twigs collected, he has the more substantial logs ready to go and he has no need of flint. Yet, he holds off. He wants to snap his fingers, set a roaring blaze and bring about glorious life within us, but he simply will not until we give the go ahead. He wants to fill our lives with smoke, bright light and transformation, but he allows us to make the call. And for some of us, we have had a roaring bonfire, but along the way it has gone unattended and faded out. Some of us are afraid to burn…it could be painful, it could leave a permanent mark. Most of us are like Vancouver Island…we don’t make starting a fire easy and keeping it burning is nearly impossible.

But whoever you are and whatever your past, our God is a consuming fire who desires to burn within you. All you have to do is ask. He is ready to go, waiting for our nod. And we have sung these words before, but I just repat them here as a prayer, “Set a fire down in my soul that I can’t contain and I can’t control. I want more of You God. I want more of You God..” That is all it takes. And as our fire burns, we feed it through a robust prayer life and our feasting on his Word. We surrender more and more of our lives as fuel for the flames, and the weird thing about God’s fire is that the more we turn to ash, the hotter and brighter the Spirit burns.

Would you pray these words with me: “Set a fire done in my soul that I can’t contain, and I can’t; control. I want more of you God. I want more of you God.”

Amen.