

In 1944 the Allied armies were marching on Paris intent on liberating it from the German military. Adolf Hitler, realizing the inevitable, ordered his armies to burn Paris before leaving. Many believe that General Dietrich von Choltitz wrestled with his conscience before refusing Hitler's decree that Paris must be set ablaze. Apparently, Hitler's general could not bear to be responsible for such a craven act of destruction.

Hitler did not know of this insubordination until he was informed by his staff that the Allies had

liberated Paris. Hitler reportedly asked, "Is Paris burning?" It seems the evil monster that Hitler was would have gained some satisfaction if the entire city of Paris had burned to the ground. His attitude of revenge was, "If I can't have it, then no one will."

This question attributed to Hitler became the title of the definitive story of the liberation of Paris. *Is Paris Burning?* was published in 1965, written by Dominique Lapierre, together with Larry Collins.

One year ago (April 15, 2019), upon hearing of the fire at Notre Dame, the title of Lapierre's book, *Is*



Is Paris Burning?

Retrospective by Greg Albrecht

Paris Burning? immediately came to my mind. Paris has not burned, but the Cathedral of Notre Dame, one of the most famous and historical landmark buildings in Paris did burn.

CHRIST-CENTERED PERSPECTIVES

On two decades-ago visits to Notre Dame, I walked under the arch above the main doorway and its relief depicting the risen Lord Jesus Christ presenting the wounds in his hands to his followers to assure them of his forgiveness and of their salvation. On one side of him is the cross, on the other side is the spear that pierced his side.

Underneath this illustration, Satan and his demons are sculpted feverishly trying to corrupt the scales of justice—the justice of God’s grace—by tilting it in such a way that God would punish sinners.

Ironically, Notre Dame burned during Holy Week. In one of the well-known photos of the effects of this devastating fire, photographer Ludovic Marin captured an eternally significant image for followers of Jesus everywhere. The photo shows debris from the fire, with charred ruins littering the sanctuary, but there, on the altar, stands the cross.

In one sense, the cross of Jesus was a fire. The cross of Jesus was the fire of God’s love consuming all human hatred and violence. The incarnate God, in the person of Jesus, voluntarily allowed his human body to be “burned” and destroyed. In Christ, all human animosity and enmity were burned up and Jesus overcame death and the grave.

To the religious authorities who despised him and asked for a sign that he was greater than their religion Jesus simply said, “Destroy this temple [his body] and I will raise it again in three days” (John 3:19). From the burned debris and charred remains of what was left of his once and forever demonstration of love, Jesus rose from the ashes.

Jesus came to be one of us and he came to be crucified. He came to our world—a place of suffering and pain and of gnashing of teeth. He came to our world—a place of hatred and violence and of sorrow and mourning. The world then, and the world now, is a place of destruction and death. In Christ God came to the cesspools and swamps of our world, because of his great love.

JESUS CANNOT BE BURNED NOR BURIED

The religious authorities in Jesus’ day thought that by arranging for Jesus to be crucified, they had “burned up” and put to death the impact of his life and teachings. They thought Jesus was over and done with. They thought that they were free from Jesus. They were surprised and shocked to hear that Jesus’ body was not where they wanted it to be—dead and buried in his tomb.

Hitler, too, was surprised to hear that his orders had not been carried out—Paris was not burning. Paris was liberated.

Jesus did not stay dead as the religious authorities wanted. He didn’t “know his place” as it were. Jesus did not remain where they put him.

Have you noticed? Jesus isn’t contained within the boundaries drawn by our world. Our risen Lord rose from the ashes on Sunday. He lives so that we too might live.

Unlike the Notre Dame cathedral, our risen Lord needs no building fund to help him rise from the dead. We need not worry about scurrying around helping him rise from the dead. All the work it takes is done. All that needs to take place for God to love you now and forever is complete. It’s over. It’s all over, except for the shouting. So, let the victory cry be shouted from every hamlet, village and city, “He is risen. He is risen indeed.”

Great cities and empires and civilizations have a shelf life. Buildings, including church buildings, come and go. They are subject to floods, fires and earthquakes. Our faith does not lie in religious buildings, artifacts or icons. Our faith is in Jesus, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). He is risen. *He is risen indeed.* □

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