

Cross Current



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DANGER DOWN BELOW



It's the closest thing on earth to the biblical picture of hell.

In eastern Pennsylvania during the last century, coal was king and mining companies extracted 300 million tonnes a year. The town of Centralia prospered and thought little about the vast network of old mines that ran like a giant maze beneath the municipality.

Then in May 1962 while workers were burning garbage in an abandoned strip mine outside of town, an exposed coal seam caught fire. Acting like a lit fuse, the seam carried flames down into the forsaken mine shafts where they soon spread out of control.

Though the surface fire was soon extinguished and officials started to relax, the situation underground only worsened. Eventually, crews tried to smother the inferno with clay and fly ash but that didn't work. The mines were flushed with water and workers excavated as much burning coal as they could reach, but that didn't work either. Ultimately, authorities concluded all they could do was keep an eye on the fire and hope it would burn itself out. It didn't.

By 1980, thick, acrid smoke still belched out of the ground all over town. Under a local gas station, the temperature was measured at 172 degrees Fahrenheit (78 C) and residents started to worry about their safety. Those fears intensified when a mine shaft collapsed, almost sending a 12-year-old boy into a massive sinkhole that suddenly opened under his feet. Around town, toxic levels of carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide were spewing into the air.

When it became clear the homes of the town's 1,600 residents were dangerous, the government bought them. Today, a few people still refuse to leave but most of Centralia has been demolished by nature or



*Read the Bible,
for a change!*
“Let God transform you into a
new person by changing the
way you think.” Rom. 12:2

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work crews. The paved streets and a few foundations are visible, and so is smoke that seeps from the ground, but the place is essentially a ghost town. So much so that Centralia was the inspiration for the 2006 horror film *Silent Hill*, which was filmed in downtown Brantford. Now scientists say the mine fire will take at least 250 years to burn out.

Seen as a cautionary tale, the story of Centralia reminds us of what happens when we think we've moved on, only to have the past come back to harm us. We're especially vulnerable when we're trying to dispose of the garbage in our lives.

That's often when today's hurt, pain or discouragement ignites something from years ago that gradually catches fire and sets aflame the inner recesses of the soul. When that happens, we tend to focus on the surface situation. We deal with the immediate circumstances that make us feel bad but ignore the core issues that rage within, like bitterness, betrayal, feelings of inadequacy, rejection and resentment.

By the time we see the need to go deeper, the emotional inferno is out of control. We try to contain the pain and smother it with work, food, pleasure or other compulsions but that doesn't help. So when nothing eases the seemingly unquenchable, unreachable flames within, we give up, hoping the pain will just go away on its own.

It seldom does. Instead, deep-seated issues keep flaring up amid anger and profound frustration. Our emotional ground gives way and our inner turmoil forces us to vent a toxic mix of pettiness, profanity and impatience. Left unattended long enough, fury in the heart will devastate our homes and poison the environment around us.

The only solution is to confront the past and make peace with it, relying on the Spirit, the Living Water, to douse the flames of self-doubt and deception. God gives us a fresh start, a new identity and the power to change. He assures us we are loved and gives us ample opportunity to love others.

Through the church, he offers acceptance, support and accountability that fosters personal growth. And once we no longer embrace victimhood or vengeance, we're free to put aside the volatile mix of hatred, heartache and hostility that engulfs so many.

Ironically, you can give your past a new future. Let God extinguish your pain and turn your heart from a ghost town into a Holy Ghost town.

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