

THE FIRE OF PREPARATION

Luke 3:16—John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but there cometh he that is mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.

Exodus 3:1-5—Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the back of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

Acts 2:1-4—And when the day of Pentecost was now come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Romans 12:1-8—I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritually intelligent service and worship. And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the

renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. For I say, through the grace that was given me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but so to think as to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to each man a measure of faith. For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another. And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

Just a further word of prayer:

Beloved Lord, we are so thankful that we are gathered here. We thank You for Your grace and mercy toward us. We thank You, dear Lord, that we believe You will meet us in Your word. Make Your word a living reality to every one of us from the youngest to the eldest. We are living in days of enormous turmoil, conflict, shaking, and trouble. And we feel in our bones that it is not going to get better. All we can do is ask that in Your mercy You will meet with us. Where we are complacent, wake us up. Where we are lukewarm, make us white hot. Where our love has somehow died, give us back our first love. Where our passion has long since departed and our zeal for the Lord's house, restore it. Do something in our hearts, and we shall be careful to give you all the praise and the glory. Dear Father, we stand by faith into the anointing which our Lord Jesus won for us at Calvary both for the speaking of Your word, for the translating of it, and the hearing of it. Hear

our prayer which we ask in the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

I want to ask a simple question: Where is the fire of God? Where is the fire of God? All through the history of the church, every time that the Lord Jesus has launched a new initiative by His Holy Spirit, there has been fire that has burned within those upon whom the Lord Jesus came by the Spirit. It was a fire that turned human society upside down. It was a fire that led thousands to the Lord. It was a fire that brought about an expression of the church in that day, a building of the church. Then traditionalism, organizationalism, denominationalism, and all the other “isms” slowly took over. The fire went out. The interesting thing is that it seemed nobody noticed that the fire had gone.

How in the world are we to prepare the way for the coming again of the Lord without the fire of God? I am not talking about strange fire, foreign fire, or occult fire. I am talking about the fire that was in the heart of the Lord Jesus when He came into this world—born of a woman, endured those thirty years of contradictions and gainsaying; and finally, by that fire of the Spirit offered Himself up to God on the cross. It was that fire of the Spirit of God which raised the Messiah Jesus up from the dead, that fire that was poured out on the day of Pentecost to become, not just the fire and zeal in the Lord Jesus, but the fire that was to dwell in one hundred and twenty very ordinary, usual human beings. And it is a very interesting thing that we hardly know any of their names, only a handful.

THE FIRE OF GOD CAME ON PENTECOST

On that day, when the Holy Spirit was poured out by a risen, glorified, enthroned Messiah, something happened on this planet which had never happened before in the long

years of its history. One hundred and twenty saved human beings were joined to a Head at the right hand of God. It was as if Head and body—an organism—had been created by the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the fire of God came into all one hundred and twenty of them.

Within hours the fire that burned in those dear people had brought about three thousand conversions. Then there were three thousand one hundred and twenty, and that fire burned within them. Within weeks, it was five thousand, and within more weeks and months, there were eight thousand. Even a great company of the priests and Levites believed. The whole encrusted establishment of the temple—the priesthood, the scribes, and the Sadducees—could not do anything about it. It turned the whole of Judea and Jerusalem upside down. It even turned Samaria upside down. For the first time, those who were Samaritans were saved by the grace of God, and the fire dwelt in them. The Jews who had despised the Samaritans so much were joined together.

THE FIRE THAT BURNED THROUGH PETER TO THE GENTILES

Within a short time, the apostle Peter stood in the drawing room of that centurion officer's home in Caesarea, which was the military headquarters of the Roman occupying force. A whole number of Gentile officers of the Roman army were present. A Messianic Jew stood and preached the gospel for the first time to full-blooded Gentiles. As he was speaking, something happened in that meeting. The fire of God that was in Peter burned within him, and suddenly he became aware that they were no longer listening to him. Something had happened. The fire of the Spirit of God had jumped from Peter into full-blooded Gentiles and saved them. It was the beginning of the most successful evangelistic crusade ever launched. It

was to go to the whole known world. It went as far north as Armenia, as far east as southern India, as far south as Ethiopia and beyond into Africa, as far west as Spain, France, and Britain. The gospel was preached in London fourteen years after the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. According to church tradition, it was Joseph of Arimathaea who preached the gospel for the first time in Britain, if it is true. It was the fire of God.

THE FIRE IN THE THORN BUSH

Wherever we look in the Bible, we find that fire is the expression of the presence of God. When He spoke with Moses, the whole mountain was enveloped in fire. At one of the great turning points in divine history, dear Moses, who was eighty years of age, doing what he had done for forty years looking after smelly and unhygienic goats, sheep, camels and donkeys at the backside of the desert as it was called in the old version. And he saw a fire. I suppose it had been like any other day for Moses. After all, he had had forty years of them. He probably thought to himself that it was a dead old thorn bush, spontaneously ignited by the sun. He looked back ten minutes later and it was still burning. "That is quite a large bush," he thought. Half an hour later he looked back and it was still burning. That is when he said to himself: "I think I better go across and see this great sight." These thorn bushes are two a penny in the desert. When one of them dies, it often goes up spontaneously in fire. I have seen it myself.

As Moses came near, God spoke to him out of the bush that was consumed with fire, and He said, "Moses, Moses, do not come any nearer. Take the shoes off your feet for the ground on which you stand is holy." It was one of the greatest turning points in divine history. Moses was about to meet with God.

Only the Lord with His great humor could have arranged and appointed such a meeting. After all, we would have expected the Lord to use a stately palm tree with its marvelous fronds. Just imagine the fire up there and Moses looking at it and saying, “Wow, that palm tree is on fire.” Then the Lord would say, “Moses, Moses, take the shoes from off your feet.” That would speak of magnificent royalty.

Or He could have taken what is called in the King James Version the shittim tree which is the acacia of the desert. The wood from this shittim tree was used to make the furniture in the tabernacle. It would have been marvelous if the Lord had burst, as if it were, into fire in the shittim tree, the acacia tree. Later on, he would have said, “Isn’t this typology amazing! This is the house of God, the dwelling place of God. It is wonderful.”

But the Lord, if I may put it reverently, got Himself into a thorn bush, no taller than Moses’ waist, and from the ground, God spoke up to Moses: “This is holy ground.” Furthermore, it was a dead thorn bush. It had lived its life, expended its energy, and died.

You would have thought the Lord would have at least gotten a green thorn bush. They even have flowers, very ordinary little blossoms. You would have thought that the Lord would have been decent and taken a nice green thorn bush.

It was as if God was saying to Moses: “You are eighty years old, and you have lived your life, expended your energy, and as far as you are concerned, you are going to die in this desert. But in fact, this is the beginning of your ministry. This thorn bush is you, and this fire is Me. I will use you. You are going to be the bush that burns with fire and not consumed, and I will speak through you again and again and again. I will speak to Pharaoh and to all the

leaders of Egypt. I will speak to the children of Israel. You are the bush that is dead, and I am the fire.”

When the fire and a human vessel that knows it is nothing get together, something happens. Divine history is made. Wherever you turn in the Bible, you will see this illustrated everywhere. But it was not just Moses and his God-given service. It was as if the Lord was saying, “Moses, this bush, which is dead with thorns and prickles, is Israel, and I am the fire in this bush. Never forget it.” Nevertheless, Moses did so on one occasion. He was so angry with the Israelites, and he struck the rock with his staff and said, “You rebels!” He forgot that God was in the bush. And God said, “You shall not go over into the land, but you shall see it from afar.”

THE FIRE IN THE NATION OF ISRAEL

It is amazing that Israel, with all her faults, failings, and weaknesses, has been kept by the grace of God through the long years of her history. Finally, after experiencing the greatest tragedy in her long history of suffering—the Holocaust—she was born as a recreated state and nation amongst the nations of the world. The flame has never died. It has been dimmed, it has almost been extinguished; but even in its most terrible times, there has always been a Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther, or an Ezra all the way through.

THE FIRE IN THE CHURCH

Let me take you a step further. It is as if the Lord is saying, “This old thorn bush is the church.” You cannot have been in the church too long to discover that it has a lot of thorns. You get easily scratched in fellowship, but the fire is there. The Lord Jesus said, “Peter, you are going to deny Me three times; but you are a little pebble *petros*, and

upon the massive of the rock, the *Petra*, I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

It is amazing to me that the church is still alive today. When we look at church history, we see some of the most extraordinary things. Ever since the Lord Jesus made this declaration, the gates of hell have sought again and again to prevail against the building work of the Lord Jesus. There are times, we have to say, when they seem to have been successful, when it seems as if the fire has gone, the zeal has gone, and the understanding has gone. And when it has died into a human organization, often it has become the persecutor of the real children of God. Then the Lord has been always faithful to His promise.

Personally I do not like the word Hades. I know it is the correct Greek word, but I wonder what it means, especially to young people. The gates of Hades means “the gates of departed dead.” Some say that it is the forces of death, that is good. When Tyndale put hell in the old King James Bible, it is much more descriptive of what the Lord meant. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. All of the strategies, all the purpose, all the goals and aims of Satan will not prevail against the building work of the Messiah.

If you look through church history, you will discover again, and again, that the Lord Jesus launches from the throne of God a new initiative by the Holy Spirit. And once again the fire burned, whether you call them, Montanists, Donatists, Paulicians, Albigenses, or Bogomils. These strange names were given to these people by others; they never took those names. It was a fire that burned. The church came back once again to its original foundation and character. There was the headship of the Lord Jesus by the Holy Spirit. There was fellowship, growth, salvation, and preaching of the gospel.

THE FIRE IN THE REFORMATION

Consider the Reformation. There was a fire in the Reformation. Whatever you may feel about anything else, when Martin Luther, that Roman Catholic monk, got saved, a fire burned within him and nothing would stop him. The Catholic Church called him that drunken monk. There was a fire, passion, and zeal within him. Can you believe that the almighty, Roman Catholic system could be turned upside down and inside out by the word of God preached by people like Martin Luther, Zwingley, John Calvin, and others? It was a fire; then it died.

THE FIRE IN THE ANABAPTISTS

Then there were the Anabaptists. In Salzburg there is not a single fountain in which Anabaptists, children of God, were not drowned. They were tied up in sacks—babies, children, and parents—and drowned. Nevertheless, a fire burnt within the Anabaptists, and whether they are known as Mennonites or Studenists or General Baptist, the fact is a fire burned until it became an organization.

THE FIRE IN THE MORAVIANS

Then there was a young aristocrat who wandered around a museum, and suddenly he saw an oil painting of the crucified Messiah. It transfixed him. He stood before it for one solid hour without moving. His eyes could not get away from the words underneath the painting: “I have done all this for you, what have you done for Me?” Into Nicholas Count Zinzendorf’s heart came the Holy Spirit, and that fire burned within him. He went back to his home in Moravia and opened his castle and all his estate to refugees of which there were thousands fleeing from Catholic persecution.

The story of the Moravians is amazing. They even had troubles. As I just said, the church is a thorn bush, a dead

old thorn bush with plenty of thorns and prickles. They were having a bad time, and then they thought the best thing they could do was seek the Lord. The Holy Spirit fell upon the whole crowd, knocked them out, and laid them flat. The flame of fire got into them, and it was the beginning of the hundred years' prayer meeting. They went everywhere. The fire so burned within them that they chose to go to the most difficult places on the planet—up into the mountains of the Himalayas and into the Arctic. They actually caught leprosy from caring for the lepers and rejoiced, because they felt that now that they were lepers, they would understand them. They sold themselves as slaves in order to reach the slaves who were being brought over from Africa to the colonies and the Caribbean. There was nothing that the Moravian brethren would not do.

THE FIRE IN JOHN WESLEY

John Wesley was a legalist of the first order, but at least he believed the word. He had read about going into all of the world and preaching the gospel, and he felt quite sure that he should go as a missionary to the colonies which are now the United States of America. On the way to Holland to get the boat to the colonies, in the middle of the Atlantic, an enormous storm arose and it appeared as if the ship would go down with everyone on board. It was clear to John Wesley that the sailors, the captain, and everybody believed they were doomed. And then in the lower part of the ship, Wesley heard the sound of singing. He thought the ship had gone down and he was in heaven. However, he saw a light shining through a door that was ajar. Very quietly, he went over, pushed open the door, and there were forty Moravians fleeing from Europe to the colonies. They had babies in arms, children on their laps, and they were singing hymns. And Wesley thought: "Oh God, if I could only have the faith that these people have."

Wesley went to the States as a missionary to the red Indians, but a few years later he returned to Britain as a failed missionary. He found out that he was unable to convert anyone, and he wrote in his journal: “Oh God, I have come to convert the red Indians, but who can convert me?”

Then he learned of a meeting in the city of London, and he heard that a Moravian preacher was going to preach. He decided he would go and hear the man. As he sat there listening to one of the Moravian preachers reading the preface of one of Martin Luther’s commentaries, he said, “I felt a strange warming in my heart.” It was the fire. It was so amazing that John Wesley had been saved. It was the beginning of the great awakening that swept through Britain and ushered millions into the kingdom of God. He, his brother Charles Wesley, and George Whitfield went everywhere through Britain, through the colonies, and elsewhere preaching the gospel. Millions came to the Lord, even those who were considered to be subhuman such as the miners in Britain. It changed Britain, and historians today believe it saved Britain from the French Revolution. It was a fire. At ninety-four years of age, dear Wesley still preached four times a day in different places riding from one place to the other on horseback in the ghastly British weather. When he died, King George, who had lost the colonies, and even though he was not a believer in God, he decreed three days mourning for Wesley and his burial in Westminster Abbey.

THE FIRE IN GEORGE FOX

I think of George Fox who could not find salvation until God met him in the hills. He began what was then called the Society of Friends. He did not want to call it Christian because he said that some were seekers. It was Cromwell who said, “It is good to be a seeker, but it is much better to

be a finder.” The Quaker movement spread through Britain and the colonies and it changed society. At one time, one third of all the Quaker preachers were in prison, and they turned those prisons into Bible schools. The criminals who were in the prisons found the Lord, were trained, and then went out as preachers. And in the end, there were more Quaker preachers. Also, through the Quakers came nursing, child reform, and prison reform.

THE FIRE IN THE BRETHREN

I could talk about the Brethren and the fire that came into them. It is so amazing. They stopped children from being sent up chimneys by an act of Parliament. When this fire of God gets into believers, it is tremendous. The trouble is that it disappears. Complacency, affluence, being comfortable, and Laodicean conditions take over and the church dies.

Listen to me: If the fire of God does not get into us, there is absolutely no way whatsoever of preparing the way for the coming again of the Lord. It is as simple as that. You and I need that fire. Charles Wesley wrote this short hymn after he heard his brother preach on the fire.

Oh Thou who camest from above,
The pure celestial fire to impart
Kindle a flame of sacred love
Upon the mean altar of my heart.

There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
To work and speak, and think for Thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up Thy gift in me.

Ready for all Thy perfect will,
My acts of faith and love repeat,
Till death Thy endless mercies seal,
And make the sacrifice complete.

A LIVING SACRIFICE WILL BE SET ON FIRE

It is a continuous source of amazement to me that the apostle Paul, writing the Roman letter, sums up everything in this one word: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritually, intelligent worship and service."

He spent the first eight chapters expounding the gospel, and three chapters expounding the election of the church and the Jewish people. Then he summed it all up in these words: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice." He was saying, "The goal of the gospel is that you should be a living sacrifice."

You may say, "Don't say that. It is a dreadful thing to say. I thought the goal of the gospel is for us to be happy and joyful, skipping like lambs. Did you say sacrifice? I did not get saved to be a sacrifice. I got saved to have all my needs met and to be satisfied."

The goal and the aim of the gospel is that we should be living sacrifices. It is the goal and aim of election. In other words, the reason God has chosen us, the reason He has foreordained us for this thing, is that we should serve Him.

Of course, our biggest problem is our self-life. It is my will, not His. It is my way, not His. It is my agenda, not

His. Is that not the problem? However, when you and I present our bodies a living sacrifice, we have taken all the different problems and in one single act we have finished them. It is no longer my will; it is His will.

“And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2a). All of us are conformed to the fashion of this world. It is our natural habitat because we are born with that kind of constitution. It is only natural for us. We think like the world, and we act like the world. But we are supposed to be Christians. Of course, we are Christians. We are converted; we have been baptized; we go to church at least once a week; but we actually act like the world. We are fashioned according to it. How can we break the mold? “Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.” And the only way that can happen is when you are a living sacrifice.

Here is the second thing: “That ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (v. 2b) .

Let's be honest: Why do we have such a problem with the will of God? We are only happy with the will of God if it falls into line with our will. We cannot prove what is the good, perfect, and acceptable will of God unless we are living sacrifices.

We shall never know the fellowship of the house of God, the fellowship of the body of Christ, unless we are living sacrifices. It is not just Paul's mind wandering here as he speaks of us as many members. But we are all one body in Christ. Notice that! We are one body in Christ. And it can only come out of being a sacrifice.

THE FIRE GOES WHEN WE THINK WE HAVE NEED OF NOTHING

I think we are in the middle-age spread. We have received so much that we are almost saturated with the truth. We have become complacent, comfortable, and very

happy. I hope the condition of the church in Laodicea cannot be written over us—"I am rich, I have gotten riches, and I have need of nothing." The Lord's estimate of these people was totally different. He said, "You do not know that you are wretched, blind, naked, and poor." Is it possible to think we have need of nothing when in fact we are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked? You may say, "I do not think it is possible with us because we are alive to the Lord." I think the church in Laodicea thought it was alive. Where do you think it got their riches? How do you think they got them? Why do you think they said they had need of nothing? We need the Lord. We need that fire of God to burn within our hearts no matter what age we are.

The end of the finished work of the Lord Jesus was to pour out the Spirit upon that hundred and twenty. There was one flame of fire for each one of them. You cannot live in someone else's zeal or fire. You have to have that fire yourself. I think the Lord is calling us to be living sacrifices. Are you ready?

Shall we pray:

Lord, you have heard all that I have said. You alone can apply it to each of our lives. Will you do something in us? Will you challenge us? Will you meet with us in a new way? Will you restore our first love? Will you kindle again that fire of Yours in our spirit? You are the only One who can make this real in us all. Lord, we need that fire of Your love, the flame of Your love burning once again upon the mean altar of our hearts. We need that first love, Lord. Let Your Holy Spirit come upon us. Make the Lord Jesus a living reality to every single one. Lord, this lukewarmness is dangerous because You said that You would vomit us out of Your mouth. Lord, make us white hot for You no matter what the problems are that we are moving into, no matter what the economic or financial conditions may be, no

matter what the climatic conditions may be. Lord, make this a real transaction. Fire us with Your love. Bring us back to where we were at the beginning. Help us to repent for our lukewarmness. We ask it in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.