

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

LESSONS FROM THE MALTA FIRE

A Sermon

Delivered by

C. H. SPURGEON

At the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington

On Thursday Evening, January 30th, 1873.

(Published on Thursday, March 18th, 1909)

“They kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold.” — Acts 28:2.

As much as lieth in us, we should seek to do good unto all men, and we can never know to whom we may be rendering service. These people of Malta never dreamed that they were entertaining an apostle, and it never entered into their heads that their simple act of hospitality would be recorded in the Sacred Scriptures, and that millions of eyes would read of, and millions of minds would think upon, this kind act of theirs on behalf of this shipwrecked company. They really entertained an angel unawares, and they had many blessings in consequence, for we find that Paul afterwards healed the father of the chief man of the island, and others of the inhabitants who were suffering from various diseases. We can never tell how God may make return to us for acts of kindness which we may do to others; but just as it is said that curses, like chickens, come home to roost, and that he who throws a stone into the air will find it fall on his own head,

so do good actions, deeds of kindness and charity, come back to us in some shape or other, even as Christ said to his disciples, "Give, and it shall be given unto you: good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again." It is the best way to bless ourselves to be earnest in blessing others. These hospitable people were bringing down upon the island of Malta untold benedictions while they were, in their simple kindness, entertaining shipwrecked mariners. At this season of the year, in the midst of such a city as this, abounding as it does with the poor and needy, there are abundant opportunities of using 'the mammon of unrighteousness' well by relieving their wants, and what you possess would be made all the sweeter to yourselves through your ministering to others in their necessities. I am not, however, going to speak upon that matter just now, but I intend to use the text in this manner. First, I am afraid *we are very apt to grow spiritually cold* and, therefore, next, the text suggests that *we should be diligent in using means for getting spiritual warmth*; and, thirdly, as there are a good many in this world who are cold, as Paul and his companions were when they came shivering from the deep, *it should be our constant duty to seek to kindle a fire*, and to receive them every one, because of the cold.

I. First, then, I am afraid that WE OURSELVES ARE VERY APT TO BE COLD SPIRITUALLY.

First, because *we are ourselves cold subjects*, — hot enough perhaps in temper, earnest enough in pursuit of business, fast enough where pleasure may draw us, but ah! how chilly, how wintry when we have to do with the things of God! I know that, at one time, we burned and flamed with sacred ardour, but we look back upon that period with the deepest regret that it should have gone by so long ago. Even now, when we are moved by an earnest discourse, or are gathered with faithful brethren, we begin to glow again; but how easy it is for us to get back to the icy state, and to have our soul frozen so that it does not flow freely as it should! Do you not find, brethren, that you never need make any effort to be dull in religious matters, but that the effort has to be made the other way, — that you have to make an effort, and need God's grace to give you strength to make it, towards holiness, towards fervency, towards enthusiasm? By nature, we are as hard, and cold, and dead as stones, and seem as if we never could be warm; and we never are unless God turns the heart of stone into a heart of flesh. And even then, it often seems to grow hard and chill again, so that we need fresh grace to warm our heart, and to keep it beating at anything like the pace of life. I know not how it may be with you, dear

friends. Perhaps you have been so lifted up by divine grace that you have never wearied in the heavenly race, if so, you are very happy and privileged individuals. But there are some of us, who, although we have not been suffered actually to stand still, have found our onward progress to be a hard climb up the Hill Difficulty, because we are so lumpish and heavy. Often have we had to cry, with Dr. Watts, —

*“ Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
With all thy quickening powers,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
In these cold hearts of ours.*

*Dear Lord! and shall we ever lie
At this poor dying rate?
Our love so faint, so cold to thee,
And thine to us so great? ”*

We are indeed cold subjects. Just compare your state of heart, for a while, with the ardour of apostles, confessors, and martyrs who lived and died for Jesus. Compare, or rather, contrast yourselves with some other children of God whom you have known, whose fervent prayers put you to shame, and whose many acts of self-denial, and whose whole persevering service now rise before you to make you blush. Above all, contrast yourselves with your dear Lord and Saviour. He was a veritable flame, of fire, but what are you? Alas! alas! what am I? Cold, cold, cold! Even his great love scarcely warms us to anything like true Christian affection. We can think of hell with its unutterable horrors, and yet be scarcely moved; we can think of heaven with its indescribable glories, and yet be scarcely affected; we can turn to thee, O thou blessed Christ of Calvary, and look upon thy ghastly wounds, yet is our soul scarcely made to melt! It is sad that it should be so, but mournfully true is it that we are cold by nature.

But then, beside that, *we live in a cold country*. Who that has to move about in this world does not know that this is true? Not only are we so chilly by nature that, even when we live in the torrid zone of revival, we can scarcely keep ourselves warm, but, alas! we are often compelled to be where everything is like the Arctic regions. You who have to spend most of your time in business, do you meet with many in the market or on the Exchange who help you to make progress in the divine life? You who have to go to work with other workmen, do you meet with many who toil for their bread who speak earnest words for Jesus? I ask you who live as servants in the house, or you whose occupation calls you abroad, do you meet with many who aid you spiritually? Have you found this world help

you on to God? In the olden time, it was a world lying in the wicked one, and God's people were strangers and foreigners here, and I fear it is so still. Our very employments, as they engross our attention, take our thoughts away from, higher things, and so tend to chill us. How often does it happen that the possession of riches brings coldness to the heart; and, on the other hand, if we grow poor, chill penury represses the genial currents of the soul, and prevents them from flowing freely, as they ought to do. There is scarcely any position in life that can be said to minister to growth in grace. How few heads encircled by a crown have ever been dedicated to God, and how seldom have the beggar's rags covered the body of a truly gracious man! Everywhere it is a cold world in which we live, and we are cold subjects in a cold world.

But then, beside that, *there are very cold seasons that come upon us.* There are times when everything seems chillier than usual. The Church at one time seems to be all in earnest; her prayer meetings are crowded and fervent, her ministry seems full of life, and zeal, and enthusiasm, the members seem to walk together in holy unity and love seeking which shall bring most glory to God. But the Church has her winters as well as her summers; after her revivals there will come years of dearth, seven years of famine after seven years of plenty, and the cankerworm will come, and eat up the fruit of the land, and that by a long space together. When the Church as a whole is cold, it is not easy for us as individuals to be warm. I have often heard members of this church say, when they have gone away to join other congregations, that they have felt as if they had suddenly dropped out of a conservatory into an ice-well. I can easily gauge the temperature of a congregation in any place where I go to preach. I can soon see that some are warm and hearty, and ready to receive the truth, while it is heavy work to preach to others because they evidently either do not understand or do not appreciate the gospel, or if they do appreciate it, they have a peculiar way of preventing the preacher from seeing that they have any enjoyment of the word that he has spoken. There are churches which always seem to be very cold, and there are other churches that once glowed with summer heat that have now come into their wintry season.

Let me add that there are not only these cold seasons in the Church as a whole, but *we ourselves have our cold seasons.* I suppose we are very much like one another; but sometimes, for some reason, we scarcely know why, we are full of fervour and ardour. We are not only in the Spirit on the Lord's day, but we are also in the Spirit all the days of the week; the candle of the Lord shines about our path, we walk in the light as God is in the light, and we have fellowship with him, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. That Spirit of God is with us, and the time of the singing of birds has come to us. At other times, the desire to

pray is within us, but we cannot pray. Gloomy doubts arise, or carking cares come crowding in upon us, or else a dreadful indifference, which we cannot shake off, steals over us, like the sleepy fits which come on people when they want to be active, but their eyelids are so heavy that they cannot keep from sleep. This will happen again and again, and we struggle against it, and seek by any means and every means to keep ourselves spiritually warm. I suppose the experience of most of God's people will verify this.

Thus I have tried to show you that we are cold by nature, we live in a cold country, and there are cold seasons with us all.

And then I may add that *there are some persons who live in very cold corners*. There are some who not only live in a country that is cold, but they are in the coldest part of that country. There may be a cold room that is more chilly than any other in the house, and some of my friends seem to have lived in that particularly cold room. Good people as they are, if they speak to you, it is very frosty talk. They never greet you with that genial smile that is born of sunshine. They seem almost to prefer to have the temperature of winter in their souls, it is constitutional with them, and they communicate that cold to those with whom they come in contact. I always like a room which has a sunny aspect; but I know some people who prefer a room that is darkened by a high brick wall. If they could have a room near the Old Bailey, with a clear view of the gallows, that is the kind of prospect that would please them. They like to think of the corruptions of their own heart, and of the depravity that rages within, and no preaching will suit them unless it makes them thoroughly melancholy; and if it makes them unutterably wretched, they consider that the preacher is a deeply experienced man of God sent to instruct them. I shall not quarrel with these brethren, and if they prefer the room with the dark or wintry aspect, they may have it so far as I am concerned. I shall be quite content to take the room with the sunnier aspect, and to look out on green fields, and waving trees, and shining water, and to see the goodness, and loving-kindness, and tenderness of the Almighty both in nature and grace.

But, besides the fact that some people are in these cold corners constitutionally, others seem to have found their way there in the order of God's providence. A wife, who has become converted, has a husband who has no desire towards the things of God, and therefore opposes and vexes her continually. A Christian is living with another Christian of totally opposite views and doctrines; they ought to have fellowship with one another, but they do not, and differences constantly come up. Then there is a Christian, whose unhappy lot it is to live with persons who have no sympathy whatever with true religion. Another Christian man is thrown, not by his own choice, but unavoidably, amongst those who continually ridicule him, or he is compelled to dwell with fellow-Christians who are

all of the cold school, and who freeze him; or what is perhaps quite as bad, a Christian is compelled to live where he has no one to assist him with a word of sympathy, none with whom he can take sweet counsel, and walk to the house of God in company. These are some of those who live in a specially cold corner, and if you are amongst them, I would say to you that, if you cannot get out of that cold corner, you must, above all others, kindle a fire because of the present cold; above all others, you must give good heed to what I shall have to say to you directly about maintaining the warmth of the heart. As you have the severer trial, you must be the more earnest in overcoming it.

II. I will say no more about the cold lest you begin to shiver while I am speaking of it, but we will now come to **THE KINDLING OF THE FIRE.**

Thank God, he does not leave us without some means of becoming spiritually warmer. There is an abundance of fuel to overcome the cold. The Christian man being subject to coldness of heart, God has provided him with the means of kindling a spiritual fire that may make him warm, and keep him warm.

The first great fire is *the Word of God*. "Is not my Word like a fire, saith the Lord?" It is so in many ways, but especially because it has such a warming influence. When we are spiritually cold, and we go to hear the Word preached, how it warms our hearts! Brethren, have you not often proved it to be so? You have been trembling, and downcast, and almost distracted, and you have said, "I will go and enquire at the hand of the Lord," and God has given you a message that has so changed your feelings that you have gone out with Joy unspeakable, blessing God that ever your feet have trodden that floor which has become sacred to you through the visitation of God's Spirit. It is not often that I can hear a sermon; but when I do, I have sometimes had seasons of very gracious refreshing to my soul. I remember, one Sabbath morning, listening to a man who was by no means literate, and as I listened, I felt the tears streaming down my cheeks as I realised afresh how precious Christ was to me, and I envied the good people who could hear the gospel preached Sabbath by Sabbath, and who had not to stand up, and deliver it to others, and go without spiritual food themselves. I am sure you, who love the Lord, will bear witness that, when Christ is preached, your heart is always warmed. The preacher may have spoken very simply, and not have tried to display any of the graces of oratory, yet the sermon satisfied your soul because Christ was in it; but if there is no Christ in it, you go down the aisles saying, like Mary Magdalene, "They have taken away my Lord." It is Jesus Christ that you want; and when you get the truth about him, and about the Father, and

about the Spirit, — when you get the doctrine of electing love, of God’s faithfulness, of God’s sovereignty, of God’s immutability, and all those precious things of the covenant of grace, you feel somewhat as the two disciples did when, on the way to Emmaus, Jesus himself talked with them, and their hearts burned within them.

Is it not very much the same also in reading the Word of God? I can speak more experimentally upon this than upon hearing the Word preached. Oh, to get one verse — or perhaps only a few words in it, — into your mouth, and keep it there, and roll it under your tongue as a sweet morsel. At first, it tastes like wafers made with honey, and as you press it between the lips of meditation, and turn it over and over on the palate of mental discernment, at last you say, “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” So the Word begins to warm your heart. You asked if there was any love there, and now it begins to flame out towards God. You thought the Spirit of adoption was gone from you, but now you say, “Abba, Father,” with no faltering tongue. Your faith, which seemed to be in a swoon, suddenly revives, and gains new vigour. Ah, brethren, read the Scriptures diligently when you are passing through these cold seasons; keep close to the fire of the precious promises and the other divine messages, and you will not be frost-bitten. That is one fire.

There is another fire which is equally efficacious. If you would be warmed when your soul is cold, *betake yourself to prayer*. Pray! Pray! Pray! Some have said that it is good only to pray when you feel moved to pray, but I would rather say that you should pray to feel moved to pray. When you feel that you cannot pray is the very time when you should pray, for when you can pray there may be less need for prayer than when you feel that you cannot pray. Instead of its being wisdom to forsake the mercy-seat because you feel dead and cold, it is the most egregious folly. A man might say to me, “If I put my hand near the fire when it is very cold it pains my hand.” No doubt it does, because the cold is in it; but you need to bear that pain in order to get the cold out. So, when we try to pray when we feel dead and cold, the very trying to pray makes us feel an inward pain; but we must try, and keep on trying. Prayer is our very life, and is essential to our health and our growth. As Montgomery’s well-known hymn reminds us, it is the Christian’s —

***“ Watchword at the gates of death:
He enters heaven with prayer.”***

If your heart is cold, multiply your seasons for prayer. Try praying with somebody else. Ask some Christian brother to come to your room,

and pray with you; and you, my dear sister, call in some Christian woman whom you know, and say to her, "Come, dear sister, and let us pray together." Much blessing often comes through two or more Christians joining their supplications in private; but if that does not help you, I would urge you to get to the meeting where many gather together to pray. If you can do so, come to the prayer-meeting, and see if your heart does not burn within you there. I cannot promise that it will certainly be so, for some of our brethren's prayers are not always fervent; but when the meeting is as it should be, we help one another to get warm, and to keep warm. I cannot tell you how much I owe to the Monday evening prayer-meetings and the other prayer-meetings that are held so frequently in connection with our work here. I do hope that we shall never have them less frequently, for those prayer-meetings have been the strength of this pulpit. The pillars on which our ministry rests are, under God, the prayers of our people. If you want to be warm spiritually, you must keep up the spirit of prayer.

Next, I would say that, in addition to hearing and reading the Word, and praying fervently, *it will often tend to warm us to be much in meditation.* Having read the Scriptures, keep them in memory; turn them over and over in your minds, and let your meditation grow beyond meditation into fellowship and communion with Christ. Sit down and think of him, and of his great love to you. Try to picture to yourself Gethsemane and Golgotha. Turn over in your mind the all-important doctrine of the Atonement, and meditate upon its wonderful efficacy; think of Christ's prevailing intercession for his people, think of his second Advent. If nothing else will warm a man's heart, surely the love of Christ will do it. There is such a warmth of love in the heart of Christ that it makes even the dead to live. Meditate perpetually upon him, and you shall not long have to complain that you are spiritually cold.

I would also strongly recommend anyone who feels a chill at his heart to *seek much fellowship with his fellow-Christians.* I believe, under God, there is scarcely any greater blessing to a Christian man than to have those to speak with who can help him by telling him their own experience. If two friends are walking together, and one of them stumbles, the other can help to hold him up. I recommend young Christians especially to seek suitable godly companions. We are companionable by nature, and we are too apt to get the wrong kind of associates; but if we have Christian companions, true helpers in the Lord, we shall find the way to heaven much smoothed. Be as much as you can with the saints of God. I have sometimes spent an hour with a congenial spirit, a man whose heart has been warm with love to his Master, and when he has gone, I have felt that I could bless God for having had the privilege of talking with him, yet that very man has said that he thanked God for that hour because of the good

he had got from me, while it seemed to me as if I had got all the good, and had given nothing in return.

If all this should not sufficiently warm you, I would strongly recommend one fire, which, under the blessing of God's Spirit, is sure to warm a Christian, and that is, *kindle the flame of earnest service for God and your fellow-creatures*. You may rest assured that the best way of getting good is by doing good. I mean, of course, for the man who is saved, because he is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Job's captivity was turned when he prayed for his friends, but not till then. Christ's disciples had all their baskets empty, but there was a boy in the crowd who had a few loaves and fishes. I have no doubt that the disciples as well as the people were hungry; but they had nothing to eat except through feeding the multitude with the loaves and fishes that their Master had blessed. When the people were fed, the disciples also were fed; and when you are awake to the necessities of others, and begin to help them, you will find God blessing you. I believe that many professing Christians are cold and uncomfortable because they are doing nothing for their Lord; but if they actively served him, their blood would begin to circulate spiritually, and it would be well with them. You know what the farmer in the country says to his boys, "You say that you can't warm yourselves by the fire; well, then, just go out into the barn, and do something that needs to be done, or go and attend to the horses in the stable;" and very soon the boys feel a good deal warmer, and it is only because they have had something to do. And Christian people, who want the minister to preach to them this doctrine and the other, if they had something to do for Christ, would be all the better for it. Let the preacher take care to keep up a good fire, and put on plenty of the coals of sound doctrine; but that alone will not warm the people; but the moment they begin to seek to do good to others, they will have kindled a fire which will warm themselves as well as others.

III. Our third point is to be that, like these barbarous people, we should not simply think of ourselves in the cold, but **SEEK TO KINDLE A FIRE FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS**, because of the present cold.

It is a very cold period, spiritually, just now. The professing Church seems to be frozen so hard that those fine skaters, of modern growth, have a fine sheet of ice on which to perform, their wonderful evolutions. If God would send us a gracious thaw, they would soon disappear. When the Church is filled with the Spirit, her members do not find any room for these modern foolish notions about high culture, which usually spring from ignorance of that which is really worth knowing. If God will give us back a really living Church, we shall soon find that these evils have

vanished. Just as the iron gets bright when it gets hot, so let the Church of Christ get red-hot, and it will soon throw off all this rubbish.

What is the first thing towards warming people at the fire? The first thing is, that *we must get a flame*; and though the Indians are said to make a flame by rubbing two pieces of wood together, I do not think that you and I will ever get it in that way. There is no way for us to get a revival-fire but from God himself. If anybody can 'get up a revival,' as it has been said that they do, in any other way, it is not worth having. The only kind of revival that is worth having is that which has come down from God, not that which has been got up by men. The fire which fell upon Elijah's sacrifice on Carmel was the fire of the Lord which fell from heaven, and which "consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." We want that kind of fire; and if we have only two or three praying people, who feel that they would die of a broken heart if the Church of Christ should continue in the condition in which she now is, we shall soon see a different state of things. The heart of God is still moved by the prayers of his people, still is his hand stretched out in blessing in answer to the cries of his children. The kindling of the fire of revival must be from a live coal from off the heavenly altar.

After you get a flame, you must remember that *all fires begin with littles*. At first you have only a little spark feebly glowing, and you might put that spark out if you tried to make it into a big fire all at once. You must let it burn a little amongst the shavings and chips and wood, and then drop your coal on deftly, cunningly, tenderly, as if you loved the little fire too much to risk putting it out by putting on too much fuel at once. We must not despise the day of small things. We must give ourselves up to the full belief that God means us to do great things by doing them a little at a time. It is because we despise little things that we do not prosper as we might. You may have heard the story of a little child, who was seen outside a door one day. A man had shot down a whole load of coals, and she was with a little fire-pan taking some of them into the house. Someone said to the child, "Do you expect to get in all that load of coal?" "Yes," replied she, "if I keep on long enough;" and there are many other great tasks that can be accomplished little by little. If we are prayerfully dependent upon God, great things can be done by any one of us; but let no one say, "I am going to do great things; I mean to have a glorious revival; there will be a great stir." I do not think there will be anything of the sort if it depends upon what *you* are going to do. I have more faith in good men speaking to their children about their souls, and in godly women praying for their little ones, and in Sunday-school teachers praying and labouring for the conversion of their scholars, and in humble, consecrated men

talking about Christ to scores, or hundreds, or thousands of people. That is how God usually sends revivals of religion, and the fire will soon spread when it begins to burn in that fashion; and then there is one thing that should always be done.

Have you never seen your servants — or you, good housewives, have you never done it yourselves, — have you never knelt down in front of the fire when it has been nearly out, and gently blown upon it? That is a fine way of getting a spark to grow into a fire; and in a Christian church, those who often go down on their knees in prayer will soon blow the spark into living flame. Just what Mary does with the kitchen or parlour fire is what you must do in order to get the spiritual fire needed because of the present cold. On your knees you must fan it with your very life's breath, and then it will burn.

But when it does burn, *there must be fresh fuel for it*. Paul knew this, and therefore he set to work picking up sticks. When we once get God's revival fire to warm this cold world, the Church must find suitable fuel to feed it. We must get some from this brother, and some from another brother, and from our good sisters too, and we ourselves must be the glowing coals, and if we can be kept close together, and be fanned by the spirit of unity and by the breath of the Holy Spirit, there will soon be a blessed furnace-heat that shall warm this cold earth.

*“ Spirit divine, attend our prayers,
Make a lost world thy home;
Descend with all thy gracious powers;
Oh come, Great Spirit, come!*

*Come as the fire, and purge our hearts,
Like sacrificial flame;
Let our whole soul an offering be
To our Redeemer's name. ”*

And perhaps, while we are trying to gather all the fuel that we can, *we may pick up a viper in the process*. It was so in Paul's case, and I should not wonder if it is so in ours. I have heard this fault found with revivals, that certain persons had been added to the Church who never ought to have been admitted. Very likely some people found fault with that Malta fire when, in the process of picking up sticks to feed it, a viper fastened on Paul's hand. I have noticed that, whenever there is a revival in the Church, there is almost certain to be a hypocrite hidden away among the converts. If you have a garden, you must have noticed that the snails come out after rain; and after a revival, slimy hypocrites are pretty sure to

appear, but what if they do? The Lord Jesus Christ did not leave off preaching because he knew that there was a Judas among his apostles; and if we should have a Judas in our ranks, should that make us give up our work for Christ? Nay; but if there are in our midst some people who are good for nothing, let us try all the more to find out those who will be good for something; and if, in the course of the Lord's work, there should be unworthy persons added to the Church, so much the greater should be our anxiety that worthy persons should be added too, to counterbalance the mischief that the others may produce.

Oh, that we might have just now the gracious assurance sent from God that we are to have a still greater revival than any that we have ever yet experienced! As a church, we have lived in revivals for nearly twenty years; there has never been a time, that I can remember, when there have not been souls converted in our midst. I do not know that there has ever been a Sabbath without a conversion in this place; I do not think there has been a sermon without a conversion. We cannot speak positively about every one of them; but we can say, to our certain knowledge of many of them, and we have every reason to believe that it was the same concerning all the rest, that their message has had upon it the blessing of God. To him be the praise, and to him let us cry that everywhere that great prayer may be answered, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven."

Thus have I used a very simple incident to set forth very important truths; but, alas, there are some, in this place, to whom this subject may have seemed very uninteresting, for they are not themselves saved, they are not themselves converted. I would not have them go out of this building without reminding them that the gospel is to be preached to every creature in all the world, and therefore it is to be preached to them. And this is the gospel: "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved." You will observe that I have not left out half of it. It is more than I dare to do to play with Christ's gospel, or to clip one of its wings. Christ's own words are, "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." To believe is simply to trust Christ; to be baptised is to be immersed in water upon profession of your faith in Jesus Christ. May God grant to all of you grace first to believe in his Son, Jesus Christ, and then to confess that faith, in his own appointed way, by being baptised in his name, and to him shall be the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**