

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

SMOKING FLAX.

A Sermon

DELIVERED BY

C. H. SPURGEON,

AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

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“The smoking flax shall he not quench.”—Isaiah xlii. 3.

I BELIEVE that the first sense of these words is not the one usually given to them, nor yet the one upon which I intend to preach to-night. We read in the 12th of Matthew that our divine Lord was assailed by the scribes and Pharisees, but he did not enter at that time into controversy with them, neither did he make them the perpetual target of his observations. Considering what hypocrites they were, and what boundless mischief they were doing, he treated them very gently indeed. They were, compared to him, but as bruised reeds, and as the smoking flax, and he could, if he had pleased, have broken them up altogether, or have altogether quenched them; but he did not come to be a mere controversialist. He was, in truth, the greatest of all reformers, but he was not so much a breaker-down as he was a builder-up. He came not so much to drive out error by reason, as to expel it by the natural and efficient process of putting truth into its place. So, to a large extent, he left these scribes and Pharisees, and other opponents, alone, and he went quietly on with his own work of healing the sick, and saving the sinful—a very good lesson to us. We get a little pugnacious sometimes, and seek religious controversy; but our Saviour did not strive, nor cry, nor cause his voice to be heard in the streets; a bruised reed he did not break, and a smoking flax he did not quench. The best way to put out the twinkling light of a smoking flax was to let the sun shine. Nobody could see it then. Instead of talking down these bruised reeds, he set up the higher claim of sure and certain truth; for men would not care to trust in bruised reeds when they had once seen something more stable and worthy to be relied upon. You and I will best put down error by preaching truth. If we preach up Christ, the devil goes down. If a crooked stick is before you, you need not explain how crooked it is: lay a straight one down by the side of it, and the work is well done. Preach the truth, and error will stand abashed in its presence.

That is, no doubt, the first meaning of this passage, as you will see by the connection in Matthew. It is said, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory." When the Lord sends forth judgment unto victory, then it will be all over with the bruised reed and the smoking flax of the hypocrite, the Pharisee, the formalist, the legalist, and every other opponent.

Usually these words are understood to mean that Jesus Christ will deal very gently with timid believers, and this meaning is not to be rejected; for in the first place, it is true; and, in the second place, it is true out of this text also, for if our Lord Jesus in his lifetime was gentle even to hypocrites, how much more will he be gentle to sincere but timorous spirits; if it be true that he will not quench the smoking flax even of a Pharisee, how much more true must it be that the smoking flax of a penitent shall not be quenched! So that, if the text does not *say* what is generally understood by it, it implies it, and the words so clearly run into the meaning that is commonly given to them.

I take it that there is a kind of instinct in the church, so that even when judged according to criticism she may seem to misapply a passage of Scripture, she generally does not misapply it, but only brings out a second light which was always behind the first, and which shines none the less brightly, but all the more so, because the first was there. I shall therefore take the text to mean something other than I have stated. "The smoking flax shall he not quench," is a text for you timorous, desponding, feeble-minded, and yet true-hearted believers, and you may appropriate it to yourselves. May the Holy Spirit help you so to do!

I. In talking of it, at this time, I shall first enquire, **WHAT STATE THIS METAPHOR REPRESENTS.**

A smoking flax represents *a state in which there is a little good*. The margin is "dimly burning flax." It is burning; but it is burning very dimly. There is a spark of good within the heart. You, my dear friend, have a little faith; it is not much bigger than a grain of mustard-seed, but faith of that size has great power in it. I wish that your faith would grow to a tree, but I am very glad that you have any, even though it be minute as the mustard-seed. You have a desire, too, after better things: you are always wanting to be more holy. You love to be among God's people, and though sometimes you are afraid that you are not one of them, you would give all that you have to be sure that you were, for you love their conversation. Having those desires, you do pray. "O sir," say you, "it is not worth calling prayer!" Well, we will not call it prayer, then, but it is prayer; for sometimes, when not even a word is spoken, the desire of the heart is a most acceptable pleading with God. "O sir," you say, "but I do not always desire alike!" I am very sorry that it is so. I wish you always had a strong desire after Christ. Still, you do desire. There is a longing, a desiring, a panting, a hungering, a thirsting; therefore there is some little good in you. "Do not praise me," you say. Oh, no, dear friend, I will not praise you! I know that you would not like it; for you have a modest estimate of yourself, and like the publican you cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." That tune suits you, does it not? I can see somewhat of good in you since you do not think well of yourself. If you did,

we might think ill of you ; but inasmuch as you even repent over your repentance, and feel as if your tears want weeping over, I am glad of it. Lowliness of heart is a grace very much despised in these days, but very much valued by the King of heaven. "To this man," says he, "will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word." There is some little good in you *put there by the Spirit of God*. "Ah," say you, "I like that word, sir ; I am sure there was no good in me by nature." Friend, I am sure of it too, if you are at all like me. The grace of God has put in us our first desire, our first loathing of sin, our first wish to be forgiven, our first desire to return to our Father from whom we have wandered. The Spirit put it there, and you are like the smoking flax, because there is a little living fire in you.

You are like smoking flax, again, because *your good is too little to be of much use to anybody*. What could we do with a smoking flax if we had it here to-night, and the gas was all out? You would, perhaps, see a glimmer, but you would say, "It is not light, but darkness visible." I like a soul in darkness to find that darkness visible. There is a good point about that. Alas, you are such a poor timid creature, you could not comfort a child of God ; you cannot even comfort yourself ! You could not strengthen the weak, for you want all the strengthening for your own self. You are not much of a soldier ; you could not march in rank : we have to carry you about in the ambulance. Well, we are not tired of carrying you, nor is God either. You are still a soldier, for you would fight if you could. Though you are invalided, yet whenever the trumpet sounds you wish to be in the thick of the fight. Poor thing that you are, you would soon be trampled down ; but you have spirit enough for it, for which I thank God. Though your courage is of no great use to anybody, yet it is of use to you, for it proves you to be a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb. I would to God that you had more light, that you might light your brother on his dreary way. I wish you had more faith, more joy, more hope, more rest, for you might then be of service to the Lord's household, and the King might find in you a willing helper. But as you cannot do that, you are like the smoking flax : there is a little good, but that good is not great enough to make you very useful. Yet I will tell you one thing you can do. When you meet with another poor soul that is like you, you can sympathize, can you not? You see, when bright and shining lights come near those who are dim, they are apt rather to shame them than to comfort them ; but you will not do that. So far you may even help the despondent ; at least, you will do so one of these days.

Smoking flax, then, has a little fire, but it is so little that it is of small service, and, what is worse, *it is so little that it is rather unpleasant*. No one delights in the smell of a candle that is dying out. Smoking flax does not yield a sweet savour ; neither does a Christian when he is in a mournful condition. There is a little good in him, but there is a great deal of wrong about him, and that wrong has an ill savour. Sometimes these smoking-flax people believe a great many errors. They do not hold the true and solid doctrine of God's everlasting love : they favour notions that are not scriptural ; and error is never sweet to Christ, nor to any of his own people. Besides, they have a great smoke

of doubts. They doubt this, and they question that, and they suspect the other thing. There is nothing more obnoxious to our divine Lord than distrust of him. It is a gracious act on his part that he puts up with it. One said to Christ, "If thou canst"; and that was a shocking thing to say to an almighty Lord: another said to him, "If thou wilt"; and that was a shameful thing to say to one so kind; and yet he bore with them both. Doubting hearts will cry, "If thou wilt, and if thou canst," and do anything sooner than believe. This is to make an ill savour in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ; for, though *we* may reckon our doubts to be trifling, they are no trifle to him, but exceedingly grievous and provoking to his heart. A dear sister came in after service this morning, and told me that she was fifty years old on the same day as myself, so she came to shake hands with me; and she added, "I am like you in that; but I am the very reverse of you in other things." I replied, "Then you must be a good woman." "No," she said, "that is not what I mean." "But are you not a believer?" "Well," she said, "I—I will try to be." I got hold of her hand, and I said, "You are not going to tell me that you will try and believe my Lord Jesus Christ, for that means unbelief of him who must be true;" and I held her fast while I added, "When your mother was about, did you say to her, 'Mother, I will try and believe you'? No, you would believe her because she was true; and I must have you believe Jesus Christ." She said, "Sir, do pray for me." "No," I said, "I am not inclined to do that. What should I pray for you about? If you will not believe my Lord, what blessing can he give you? What has he ever done that you should say, 'I cannot believe him'?" She again answered, "I will try." I was not content till I had reminded her of the word, "He that believeth in him hath everlasting life," and I pressed her to a full faith in the risen Lord. The Holy Spirit enabled her to trust, and then she cried, "I have been looking to my feelings, sir, and this has been my mistake." I have no doubt that she had done so; and a great many others are doing the same; and their doubts are just that horrible smoke which comes from smoking flax. O, ye poor doubters, believe the Lord Jesus Christ! To say, "I cannot believe him," is to say in other words that he is a liar, and we cannot allow you to say *that*.

Dear friend, if you are like the smoking flax, there is something good in you; but that is so sadly little that there is a great deal that is trying about you; yet the Lord will not quench you. You are full of all sorts of fears; you are afraid of a shadow; you are trembling at nothing at all. Why is this? You are troubled when you ought to be glad, and you make your whole family sad when there is no earthly reason for it. May the Lord deliver you! Those that are highest in faith have tried to comfort you, and you have pulled them down, instead of their being able to draw you up. Come, friend, I would be as gentle as ever I can: my text bids me be so. I have no extinguisher for your smoking flax, for my Lord has said, "The smoking flax shall he not quench."

I must add one more thing about this state, and it is this, though the good of it is so little that it is of very little use to other people, and sometimes is very obnoxious, yet there is *enough good in you to be dangerous in Satan's esteem*. He does not like to observe that there is yet a little fire in you, for he fears that it may become a flame. If any

of you were to see a man standing at the back of one of our public buildings lighting his pipe, I will be bound to say that you would be half afraid of an explosion, for he might be applying dynamite. There are times when the smallest smoke would fill the bravest men with fear. Even so

“Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.”

If he hears you groaning about your sin, he is frightened at it. “Oh,” says he, “they have begun to feel: they have begun to mourn: they have begun to desire: they have begun to pray: and soon they will leave me.” Let a farmer perceive a little smoke coming out of one of his ricks, and I am sure that he will not say that there is nothing at all in a smoking flax, but he will hasten to prevent a conflagration. So the little grace that is in you, dear friend, Christ sees, and he approves of it, for he knows the possibilities of it—how little faith can grow into strong faith—how the grain of mustard-seed can become a tree, and the birds of the air may yet lodge in the branches thereof; and Satan, also, knows what may come of it, and he is moved to quench it if he can. We, therefore, would encourage you, and fan your spark to a flame.

There is the first question answered. What state does this represent?

II. Secondly, WHEN ARE SOULS IN THAT STATE?

Some are in that state when they are newly saved—*when the flax has just been lighted*. Those that are to be received into the church to-night I welcome very heartily, but they are very newly lit, and some perhaps would have said, “Let them wait a bit.” Ay, but then our Lord does not quench the smoking flax because it is newly lighted, nor will I. No place in the world is so good for the lambs as the fold. No place is so good for babes as their own home. No place is so good for young Christians as the church of God. So let them come.

Being newly converted, they are strange to many things. You have made a host of discoveries. You find more depravity in your heart than you thought was there; you find enemies where you expected to meet with friends. All this is apt to damp your courage; but do not be cast down; for though it be but a little that you are lighted, yet the loving Jesus will not quench the smoking flax.

Sometimes a candle smokes, not because it is newly lit, but because it is *almost extinguished*. I know that I speak to some Christians who have been alight with the fire of grace for many years, and yet they feel as if they were near the dark hour of extinction. But you shall not go out. The Lord will not quench you himself, nor will he permit the devil to quench you. He will keep you alight with grace. “Oh,” but you say, “I am so depressed in spirit!” Yes, some of God’s best servants have been of a sorrowful spirit. Remember Hannah, whom Eli cruelly rebuked, but who, nevertheless, got a blessing. David had to say, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?” and yet he was a man after God’s own heart. Perhaps you are not well, or you have had an illness that has told much upon your nervous system, and you are depressed; and therefore it is that you think that grace is leaving you, but it will not. Your spiritual life does not depend upon nature, else it might expire: it depends upon grace, and grace will never cease to shine till it lights you into glory. There-

fore be not cast down. You may think that your light will go out in eternal darkness, but it never shall, for the Lord Jesus Christ will preserve the flame.

Sometimes the wick smokes when *worldliness has damped it*. If some of you never have any holy joy, I am not surprised, for you are so taken up with the world, and so fond of it. The life of God is in you, but it is smothered. You are like an autumn fire out in the garden when they are burning the weeds: there is a fire, but all you can see is smoke. Yes, you smother up your piety with the things of this world, and no wonder that it smokes; but what a mercy it is that the Lord does not allow even you to perish! He keeps the dying flame alive though hidden away.

At times a wick burns low because *a very strong wind has blown upon it*. Many men and women are the subjects of very fierce temptations. The place in which they live is a trial to them, and their natural constitution furnishes them with a host of temptations; and so the flax scarcely burns, but smokes and smoulders. We do not wonder that it should be so.

There are many other reasons why we grow dim at times—reasons, but none of them sufficient to be an excuse. If we were what we ought to be, we should be burning and shining lights always, and there would be no times in which we should be like the smoking flax; but then we are not what we ought to be, we fall short of the true standard, and we become feeble believers.

III. I desire to finish with a word of promise. WHAT DOES JESUS DO WITH THOSE WHO ARE IN THIS STATE? He says that he will not quench the smoking flax. What a world of mercy lies in that word! Everybody else would quench us but Christ. I am sure that some Christians get into such a state that the most loving Christian friends find it hard to bear with them; and fear that such a state of mind cannot be consistent with grace at all. Thus your friend would give you over as lost. But Jesus Christ says that he will not do so.

He will not quench you, first, *by pronouncing legal judgment upon you*. He will not say, "You have broken my laws, and I have done with you." If he did, our only answer could be, "Enter not into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." If the Lord were once to come to that, he would quench us all. Not only some few of the tremblers, but the strongest among us must go to the wall. The Lord Jesus Christ has not come to condemn, but to save.

He will not quench you, dear friend, *by setting up a high experimental standard*. Certain deep divines will say, "You must have felt so much of this, and so much of the other, or else you cannot be a child of God." Who told the good man so? Who made him to be a judge? The Lord Jesus Christ does not quench even the feeble, faint desire, or the trembling faith of his servants, though they do fall far short of that experience which ought to belong to a child of God.

He will not judge you, dear friend, *by a lofty standard of knowledge*. I have known persons who have thought, "If that convert is not better instructed in the doctrines, he is no child of God." The Lord has some of his children whose heads are in a very queer state; and if he first puts their hearts right he afterwards puts their heads right. But for you

and for me to say that a man is not a child of God, because he does not know all that the advanced saints know, is a very wicked thing. I am sure that your little child, who cannot read or write, is pressed to your bosom, dear mother, with just as much affection as that brave son of yours who has just been winning the first prize at school. You do not say, "I will not love the little one because he is not a man;" or, "I will not love my little daughter because she is not grown up to womanhood." Oh, no! The Lord loves the little ones. If you can say, "One thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see," you are taught of God. If you know these two things—yourself a sinner, and Christ a Saviour—you are scholar enough to go to heaven.

And the Lord Jesus Christ will not quench you *by setting up a standard by which to measure your graces*. It is not, "So much faith, and you are saved. So little faith, and you are lost." Oh, no; if thou hast faith as a grain of mustard-seed it will save thee. If thou dost believe in Christ, thou art saved. That woman who touched the hem of Christ's garment with her finger, and then tremblingly slunk back, was truly healed, slight as her touch was. Even Simeon, who took the Saviour up into his arms, and said, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace," cannot more surely be said to have had a saving faith than that poor woman who came behind, and touched the hem of the Master's garment.

Come along, you little ones,—you trembling ones! Be not afraid! Jesus will not quench you by any of these means. I will tell you what he will do with you; and that is, instead of quenching you, *he will protect you*. He will blow upon you with the soft breath of his love till the little spark will rise into a flame. You young folks do not know what trouble some of us used to have, forty-five years ago, when we got up of a morning and had to strike a light in the old-fashioned way. There we were with a flint and a steel, striking away in a tiresome manner till we spied a little spark down in the tinder—oh, such a little one, and then we gently tried to blow it into a flame! How we used to prize a spark on a cold, frosty morning, when our fingers were pretty well frozen! We never put out the sparks by shutting the lid on the top of the tinder, but we tried if we could to light our match.

Now, the Lord Jesus Christ will blow softly upon you with his gentle Spirit. He will bring to your mind exceeding great and precious promises. He will bring to you kind friends, who shall tell you their experience, and try to comfort you. I should not wonder, my dear brother, that one of these days I shall hear you pray a strong, brave prayer; I should not wonder if you before long come forward, and made an open profession; and if you have done so already, I feel pretty sure that you will honour it, and grow stronger, till one day we shall say, "Who is that bold witness for Christ? Who is that burning and shining light?" He is the man who was once likened to the smoking flax. I have had the portraits of my two boys taken on their birthdays, from the first birthday till they were twenty-one. The first year the little fellows are sitting, two of them in one perambulator. At twenty-one they are doing nothing of the sort: they are men full-grown. Yet I can trace them all along, from the time when they were babes, till they became little boys, and then youths, and then young men. I

should not have been pleased to have seen them wheeled about in the perambulator for twenty-one years. In that case, I should have thought myself a most unfortunate father. And so I do not want to have any of you remaining in spiritual infancy : we long to see you come to the fulness of the stature of perfect men in Christ Jesus. Life is precious, but we look for growth : a spark is fire, but we expect flame : grace is priceless, but we long to see it daily increased by going on unto perfection. Despise not the day of small things, but yet advance to greater things than these. Be comforted, but not self-satisfied ; rest, but do not loiter.

The table of the Lord is spread, and it is a feast not for men alone, but for babes in grace. Come hither you that love the Lord, and you that trust him, however feeble your trust. However faint your courage, come and welcome ! My Lord's table is not for giants only, but for infants also. The viands are not strong meat, but bread and wine, fit food for the faint and feeble. Examine yourselves, ye sincere tremblers ; but do not let the examination end in your staying away ; but rather mark how the text says, "let a man examine himself, and *so let him eat*" : not so let him refrain from eating. Ho, you that hope in his mercy, your Lord invites you to his own feast of love ! You may come and welcome. If you have come to Christ himself by faith, come to his table, and remember him to-night.

The Lord bless you, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON.—Isaiah li.

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"THE SWORD AND THE TROWEL." Edited by O. H. SPURGEON.

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