

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

GOD'S FIREBRANDS.

A Sermon

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"Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"—Zechariah iii. 2.*

It may be well to explain these words, for, simple as they are, a few words of exposition may be useful to open up the metaphor, and enforce the thrilling truth that underlies it.

There is mention of *a fire*. A cry of "FIRE!" has something fearful in it. When a fire begins to get the upper hand with us, it is terrible in its destructiveness. The fire here meant is more awful than any flame that makes havoc of matter, and its devastations are ten thousand times more appalling. It is the fire of sin. It blazed in the heart of an angel, and he became a devil. Its sparks fell into the bosom of mother Eve, and into the heart of father Adam, and paradise was burned up, and the world became a wilderness. Sin is a fire which destroys the comfort of mankind here, and all the joy of mankind hereafter. It is a flame which yields no comfortable warmth. The sinner may dance in the light of it for a moment, but in sorrow will he have to lie down in it for ever. Woe unto those who have to make their bed in this fire, to dwell with these consuming flames for a term that knows no ending!

There is, further, mention of *a brand*. Nothing can be more suitable to burn in the fire than a brand. It is not a branch just taken from the tree, fresh and full of sap; it is a brand,—dry, sere timber, fit for the burning; it is not a mass of stone or iron, but a combustible brand. And what does this indicate but *man's*

* Another Sermon by Mr. Spurgeon, on verses 1 to 5, is No. 611 in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, "Zechariah's Vision of Joshua the High Priest."

natural heart, which is so congenial to the fire of sin? Our heart is like the tinder, and Satan has but to strike the spark, and how readily does the spark find a nest within our bosom! As the firebrand fits the fire, so does the sinner fit in with sin. When sin and the sinner come in contact, it is "Hail fellow, well met!" They are boon companions. The sinner's heart is the nest well prepared, and sins are the fowl birds which come to nestle there. Not to go a step without a particular application, it will be well for us all to understand that *we* are ourselves like the brands; there is a fitness between us and sin; if we burn in the fire of sin, it is no wonder; with our fallen nature, it is no greater marvel that we should be instigated by sin than that the firebrand should kindle in the flame.

Beyond the distinct allusion to a fire and a brand, we read of *a brand in the fire*. Nor is it merely a brand hitherto lying upon the heap, to be by-and-by put upon the flames; it is "a brand plucked out of the fire." It has been in the fire. Does not this portray our condition,—not only congenial for the fire of sin, but actually burning and blazing in it? We began very early. Disobedience to parents, angry tempers, petty falsehoods, many sorts of childish obstinacies and wrongdoings,—all these were like the first catchings on fire of the brand. We have blazed away the reverse of merrily since then; some have become charred with sin, till their very bodies contain the marks of that tremendous fire, while in every case the soul receives a charring and blackening from the flame. Not one of us has been able, even with godly training and Christian parentage, to escape from burning to some extent in this fire. Alas! alas! for those who are even now in it!

There is a fair side to the picture; it is not altogether gloomy. While we have a fire, and a brand, and a brand in the fire, we also have, blessed be God! *a brand plucked out of the fire*. Sinners these, who, though they have still within them the propensity to sin, are no longer in the fire of sin. They have been taken away from it. They sin through infirmity, but wilful sin they do not commit. Their nature has been changed. They have received the renewing grace of God. The fire that once burned within them has been quenched. They recollect, to their grief and sorrow, the mischief that sin did to them, but it is not doing them the same mischief now. They are delivered from the body of sin and death.

Still, the force of the passage seems to lie in the words "*plucked out of*." You may sit down on the settle by the hearth in one of those good old country fire-places where they still burn the logs, and perhaps a brand drops out upon the hearth, where it flames a little while, and then goes out. This is not a picture that we can appropriate, for there never was an instance known of a man by himself dropping out of the fire of sin. Alas! we love it too well. "The burnt child dreads the fire," says the proverb; but we are like the silly moth that flies at the candle, and singes its wings, yet still uses those wings to mount up again into the flame; and if it falls, all full of pain and torment, with burnt legs, and with

almost all its wing gone, it struggles, it pants, it labours to get into the fire again. Such is man. He loves the fire which is his destruction. In youth, we put our finger into the flame. We feel that it is burnt, yet again we put our hand into it. Then, in after years, we persist deliberately till that sin has consumed us from head to foot, and we lie down in our grave with our bones filled with disease,—foul fruit of the sins of our youth, our very corpses in their mortality bearing witness to the corruption of our morals.

Albeit the Christian is relieved of that peril, he does not escape by his own free will. He is plucked out of it. To be plucked out, there needs a hand quick to rescue. You know that pierced hand, and how it burnt itself when it was thrust into the hot coals to pluck us out like brands from the burning. It was no use waiting till we dropped out, for we should never have done so; there was no hope of that. With all the appliances of grace and of judgment, the two together could not bring us out. But effectual vocation did it, when the Spirit of the living God took the firebrand in his hand, and without asking it whether it would or not, by the sweet and irresistible compulsions of divine grace plucked the brand out of the fire. Now, every believer in the Lord Jesus is a trophy of the strength as well as of the mercy of God. It took as much omnipotence to snatch him from the fire as it needs to make a world, and every believer may feel that he is a brand plucked from the fire.

This question, as it appears to me, will bear three renderings; first, it may be looked upon as *an exclamation of wonder*: "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" Secondly, as *an enquiry or hope*: "Is not *this* a brand"—this one particularly,—"plucked out of the fire?" And, in the third place, it is certainly *a defiance for us, assured of our safety, to throw into the face of Satan, the accuser*: "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

I. THE TEXT BEARS THE SENSE OF WONDERMENT: "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

It was said of Joshua, the high priest. There was such astonishment at his preservation that, with hands uplifted, the question was asked, "Is not this man just like a firebrand snatched from among the glowing coals?" Nor is this marvel confined to Joshua. I believe this is *a matter of wonder in the case of every saved sinner*. Was there ever a man saved by grace who was not a wonder? Is not every Christian conscious that there is some peculiarity about his own salvation which makes it marvellous? If you cannot all chime in with "Yes," I must at least lead the chorus, in which an overwhelming multitude will join, confessing that it was so with myself. For a long while, I could not believe that it was possible that my sins could be forgiven. I do not know why, but I seemed to be the odd person in the world. When the catalogue was made out, it seemed to me that, for some reason, I must have been left out. If God had saved me, and not the rest of the world, I should have wondered indeed; but if he had saved all the world except

me, that would have seemed to be according to the common course, and a right course, too. And now, being saved by grace, I cannot help saying, "Yes, I am a brand plucked out of the fire!" And does not each believer say the same? Why, look at the believer. He is fallen, lost, and yet, though lost in his first parent, he is saved in Christ. The believer's own nature is depraved like that of other men, and yet, contrary to nature, he is made a new creature. As though Niagara were suddenly made to leap upwards instead of falling downwards, our nature, so mighty for sin, has been suddenly turned into the opposite direction, and we have been constrained to seek after grace and holiness.

Out of the state of our natural depravity we have been plucked, so that every man who is delivered from its sway may well say, "Am not I a brand plucked out of the fire?" Each Christian, knowing his own heart, and having a special acquaintance with his own peculiar besetting sin, feels as if the conquest of his own will by the grace of God were a more illustrious trophy of that grace than the conquest of a thousand others. I can well understand that none of us will yield the palm in heaven to any other as to our indebtedness to the mercy of God. You may sing, and sing loudly, each one of you, and each one say "I owe more to God's grace than any other owes;" but there is not one of us who will concede the point. We shall each strike up our own peculiar note, and louder yet, and louder yet, and louder still our notes of gratitude will rise to the seventh heaven "unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever." Each Christian, then, for some reason, will feel that he is peculiarly "a brand plucked out of the fire." I envy not the feeling of any believer who should dispute this. May you and I be more thoroughly baptized into the spirit of humility, that with deeper gratitude we may feel how peculiarly we are indebted to the grace of God!

Though this is the case universally, there are instances so uncommon that they excite surprise in the minds of all who hear of them. In the cases of extraordinary conversion, one of the first is *the salvation of the extremely aged*. Imagine a person here who has lived to be seventy or eighty years old, and all this time his heart has never heard the sigh of repentance, and never felt the joy of pardon. You have lived only to cumber the ground all these years, and you are still an enemy to God; while on the borders of the grave you have no hope of heaven. O soul, your case is very sad! It were enough to make angels weep, if weep they could, to think that such an one as you, after so many years of long suffering, should not be melted thereby. Now, suppose the Lord should appear to you to-night, and say to you, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. I took thee into the house of prayer to-night on purpose that the Word might come with power to thy soul, and I have this to say to thee,—Come now, and let us reason together: though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though

they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." What sayest thou, thou hoary Jacob, but without Jacob's faith, leaning upon thy staff, would it not be a wonder if now thou shouldst begin to love the Lord, and begin to believe in Jesus? Oh, may God give thee grace to do so, and then I am sure thou wilt say to thy kinsfolk and acquaintance, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

There have been instances of persons converted at the most advanced age. There was one who went, I believe, to hear Mr. Toplady preach the very day when he was aged a hundred. He had been a constant neglecter of the house of God, but when he arrived at the age of a hundred, attracted by the fame of Mr. Toplady, who was an exceedingly popular, as he certainly was a highly evangelical preacher, and happened to be preaching in the town where the man lived, he said he would go on that day to hear him, that he might recollect his birthday. He went, and that day God in his grace met with him. I remember, too, the instance of a man who was converted by a sermon which he heard Mr. Flavel preach, and which was blessed to him eighty-three years after he had heard it, when he was at the age of ninety-eight. The Word came with power to his soul after all that interval of time. Just as he was on the borders of the tomb, he was made to enter into eternal life. May the God of infinite mercy give such a blessing to aged ones here, and they will be brands plucked out of the fire!

Remarkable, too,—I might almost say exceptional,—is *the conversion of people who have been accustomed to hear the gospel from their youth up, who, though not, perhaps, absolutely aged, have nevertheless been for years receiving gospel privileges without any result.* They have been lying at Bethesda's pool, with its many porches, now for forty or fifty years. Oh! there are some such here. You have not heard me all that time. Some other ministry has, in times past, fallen upon your ear, and perhaps our own voice is now familiar to you through your having heard it these ten or twelve years. You listened to it at first with attention. You were riveted for a little while. Then it grew to be an ordinary thing; and though still you give the preacher a fair hearing, there is very little of that drinking in of the Word which there once seemed to be. Some of you, perhaps, will almost go to sleep here now. I wish sometimes that you were elsewhere; perhaps another voice would make your ears to tingle; you know my voice full well. It is quite possible for a minister to preach too long to any one set of people, if they get so accustomed to the tones of his voice that they are never aroused. The "click, click" of the mill gets to be so customary to the miller that he goes to sleep. Over in Bankside, I am told, when a man is first put inside a boiler while the rivets are being fastened, he cannot stop long, the noise is so dreadful; but, after a time, the boilermaker gets so used to the horrible din that he can almost go to sleep inside. Well, now, so it really is under any ministry when the people get gospel-hardened. The same sun which melts wax

hardens clay. The influences which tend to make some people better make other people a great deal worse. Some of you have thus trifled with your own conscience. Should you be saved to-night, you would be brands plucked out of the fire; and may we not hope that you shall be? Will not some of us pray for it?

Further still, and apparently the wonder increases, *there have been cases of gross sinners in which this marvel has been still more exciting.* It is a merciful thing that God forgives drunkenness. Some of those who have wallowed in it have been saved. We sometimes talk of a man being "as drunk as a beast," but who ever heard of a beast being drunk? Why, it is more beastly than anything a beast ever does. I do not believe that the devil himself is ever guilty of anything like that. I never heard even him charged with being drunk. It is a sin which has no sort of excuse; those who fall into it generally fall into other deadly vices. It is the devil's backdoor to hell, and everything that is hellish; for he that once gives away his brains to drink is ready to be caught by Satan for anything. Oh! but while the drunkard cannot have eternal life abiding in him while he is such, is it not a joy to think of the many drunkards who have been washed and saved? This night, there are sitting here those who have done with their cups, who have left behind them their strong drink, and who have renounced the haunts of their debauchery. They are washed and cleansed; and when they think of the contrast between where they used to be on Sunday night and where they are now, they give an echo to the question, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

Very frequently, where this sin comes, blasphemy is added to it; and how many we have, who, though now saved by grace, were once fearful swearers, and could defy the God that made them to destroy them, or to inflict the most horrible judgments upon them, which it were a shame even to mention! But almighty grace takes the swearer, and says to him, "You shall curse no longer, for I have blessed you; I do not intend that you should imprecate curses on yourself; you shall now begin to plead with me for saving mercy!" Many, many, many such, whose tongues might well have rotted in their mouths through blasphemy, have been cleansed by Jesu's blood; and the tongue can now sing that once could curse, and the lips can now pray that once could utter oaths. "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" Oh! you are here, Jack, are you? You can swear. Sometimes, when you are at sea, you roll out an oath or two; and when you are on shore, you know what you are; but may my Master meet you, and may he once for all transform you, and put his Holy Spirit to dwell in you, instead of the seven devils that are there now; and then you will say, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

Can we pass over *the case of some who have given themselves up to sin, to work it with greediness?* Alas! how men turn aside with scorn from the harlot in the street, and they think of her as though she must be consigned to the seventh hell, albeit that they themselves, perhaps, are viler still! But how shall we give a

preference to one sinner rather than to another, when it must take two to commit this iniquity? But, alas! we know that, in London, our streets abound with those whose very names seem to make the cheek of modesty to mantle with a blush. Well, should there be such an one strayed in here,—sister,—for thou art a sister still,—the Lord Jesus receiveth sinners, and though thou hast sinned very foully, “there is forgiveness with him that he may be feared;” and his voice still says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Whoever you may be that have fallen into these polluting sins which do such terrible mischief, and which bring down God’s anger upon men, yet still the heart of God melts with pity to the chief of sinners, and he cries, “How can I give thee up?” and lets the lifted thunder drop. Oh! when such are saved,—and there are scores, and scores, and scores, to our knowledge, now rejoicing in Christ, who have found peace in this house, though once the chief of sinners,—when such are saved, we say of each one of them, “Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?”

Or, what if you have even worn the felon’s dress? What if you have ever plunged into such sin that the very thought of it makes your ears to tingle? What if the darkness of the night could tell of such hideous crime that the brightness of day seems all too good for such an offender as you have been; still, the rivers and floods of divine mercy can break forth, and rise above the loftiest Alps and Andes of iniquity. The deluge of the Saviour’s pardoning grace shall mount to twenty cubits upwards, until the tops of the mountains of sin are covered, and you, the chief of sinners, shall have it said of you, “Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?”

We have gone a good length in the way of wonderment, yet one wonder, I think, is greater than all these. I have almost ceased to wonder when the swearer is converted, or when the harlot is saved; not because it is a mighty act of grace, but because it is common enough to be often repeated. God’s mercy is extended very freely to such sinners as these; but there is a wonder which I do not often see. I do see it, though not often; I wish I could. It is, *when a self-righteous religious man gets saved.*

“What,” say you, “do you mean by that?” Why, I mean those good people who go to church and chapel regularly, have family prayers, and say their own prayers, and think themselves upright. They will not confess that they have sinned, except in the mere complimentary way in which they are accustomed to say that they are “miserable sinners”, though they do not look very miserable. Peradventure, I address some such now, who felt, while I was preaching to the sinner, as if their dainty holiness was quite shocked. They are double-distilled in their refinement, they are unutterably holy and free from hypocrisy, their heart all the while loathing the plan of salvation, and rejecting the grace of God, because they believe that they are as good as they need be. To talk to them of crying, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” is to insult them. Have they not been baptized? Have they not been

confirmed? Have they not gone through all the means? All must be right with them, they are so good; who could think of finding fault with them?

Now, if ever such people as these are saved from this terrible disease of self-righteousness, we should have to say indeed, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" And, nowadays, it is getting so common that it ought to be a subject of prayer with God's people that God would deliver this land from the spreading miasma, the Romanism, *alias* Puseyism, which has covered it almost everywhere. If a man wants to make sure of everlasting wrath, let him fall into the deep ditch of Puseyism, for the abhorred of the Lord do fall therein. You may get out the common sinner, but those who wrap themselves about with vestments and fine garments of ceremony, who shall reach these? The hocus-pocus of the priesthood, the gewgaws, the ceremonies, the mummary which they designate worship,—these things form the refuge of lies behind which they hide themselves, and the true gospel of the blessed God is scarcely heard. What with their chantings and intonings, how can the still small voice of the gospel be heard? Through the dim smoke of incense, and the glare of gorgeous vestments, how shall Christ have a hearing? The Man of Nazareth alone is he who can save sinners. May he, in his mighty power to save, rend away these rags of Rome from before his cross, and let the naked beauty and simplicity of the gospel shine out again! Once more may we have to say, in the words of Cowper,—

"Legible only by the light they give,
Stand the soul-quickening words, 'BELIEVE AND LIVE.'"

II. With more brevity than the preacher likes, though with perhaps as much amplitude as will be pleasant to yourselves, we shall now take the text BY WAY OF ENQUIRY OR HOPE. Our time has so far gone that I can only hint at what I meant to say.

When a sinner's eye is suffused with tears, and the sorrowful cry breaks forth, "Alas! woe is me!" you may then say, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" for the tear of sorrow for sin is a blessed omen of mercy's dawning. May mercy reach her noontide soon! And when, alone, the knee is bent, and the whispered prayer goes up, "Jesus, Master, pity me; save me, or I die," the angels recognize the penitent's prayer. They say, "Behold, he prayeth!" and then they feel that this is "a brand plucked out of the fire." The tear of penitence and the prayer of the seeking soul are evidences of the working of almighty grace.

And when the poor soul at last, driven by necessity, throws itself flat at the foot of the cross, and rests its hope wholly and alone on Jesus, then we may say of it, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

And when, in the midst of many a conflict and soul-struggle, the heart flings away its idols, and resolves to love Christ, and vows in his strength to be devoted to his service, we may say again with pleasure, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

I would invite you to think over these signs of grace, and if you see them in yourselves, may you ask the question, and be able to answer it with joy, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

III. And, lastly, WHAT A QUESTION OF DEFIANCE THIS IS!

Do you not catch the idea of the text? There stood Joshua, the high priest, there stood the angel of the Lord, and there stood Satan. The adversary began to attack Joshua, but the angel of the Lord said to him, "The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan; even the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" What hast thou to do with him? If God has plucked him out of the fire, thou canst never put him in again. Seeing God has plucked him out of the fire, go thou thy way, and mind thine own business! Thou hast nothing to do with this saved soul, this elect vessel, this one whom God has chosen, in whom the Spirit's power has shown itself. He has plucked him out of the fire; go thy way, Satan! and leave this soul alone."

It is a defiance, full of majesty and grandeur. *It reflects a gorgeous lustre on the past.* "God saved that soul," says the angel to Satan. "Why did he do it? Why, because he chose him, because he ordained him unto eternal life, because everlasting love had set itself upon him. What hast thou to do with him? If God has chosen him, dost thou think that thou canst undo the divine decree? Canst thou reverse the counsels of the Most High, or dash in pieces the settled purposes of the infinite mind? Go thy way! God hath snatched him from the fire, determined to save him. Go thou, and think not to frustrate that divine design!"

Nor less did the angel seem to *dart a look forward.* If God had plucked him from the fire, why did he do it? To let him go back again? Will God play fast and loose with men? Does he pluck brands out of the fire to thrust them into the flame again? Absurd! Preposterous! Why has he plucked this brand out of the fire? Why, to keep it from ever being burned. That brand, taken out of the fire, shall be exhibited in heaven as a proof of what God's almighty grace can do; and therefore the angel says to the devil, "Get thee gone! What hast thou to do with this man? God means to save him, so canst thou destroy him? God has done that which is the earnest and pledge of his perfect eternal safety; dost thou think that thou canst thwart God's resolution and intention?"

Now, beloved brethren and sisters in Christ, do realize in yourselves this precious thought, each one of you. If the Lord has changed thee, if, indeed, thou art a brand plucked out of the fire, why shouldst thou fear the temptation which now assails thee? Dread not all the temptations that may attack thee. Weak as thou art, the God who has done so much for thee cannot leave thee now. He will not leave his purpose half accomplished. He will not be disappointed. He will to the end carry on his work till he brings you up to heaven. Why, I think some of you, who were very great offenders, ought often to take comfort from your conversion. You can say, "What a change there is in me! How

far beyond anything I could ever have wrought in myself! It must have been God's work.

“‘And can he have taught me to trust in his name,
And thus far have brought me to put me to shame?’”

The whole end to which we drive is this,—May God enable us all to see that our salvation is in him! Jonah had to go into the whale's belly to learn that grand axiom of theology, and the most of us had to be sorely beaten before we found out that “salvation is of the Lord.” If thou knowest this, look to the Lord for it. Repose thyself on him now, and thou shalt be his for aye; thou shalt dwell on high; thy place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; and thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty; they shall behold the land that is very far off.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

JOB I.

Verse 1. *There was a man in the land of Uz,*

Job was a man indeed; a true man, a man of the highest type, for he was a man of God.

1. *Whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright,—*

Job was thoroughly true and sincere, and in this sense he “was perfect and upright,”—

1. *And one that feared God, and eschewed evil.*

He had both sides of a godly character, a love of God and a hatred of sin.

2. *And there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters.*

Job was highly favoured in having such a family of sons and daughters.

3. *His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east.*

Job was not a poor man, yet he was a man of God;—one of those “camels” that manage to go through “the eye of a needle.”

4. *And his sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters—*

Who were very modest and retiring, and would not have gone to the feast if they had not been sent for; but their brothers were kind and thoughtful, as all good brothers will be.

4, 5. *To eat and to drink with them. And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them,*

Job did not go to the feast; perhaps he felt too old, his character was too staid for such a gathering, and he had higher joys, that were nearer his heart than any earthly feast could be.

5. *And rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.*

He thought, “Perhaps, in their rejoicing, unholy thoughts may have intruded; they may have been unguarded and lax in their conduct. They may not have fallen into any gross sin; but, in their feasting, they may