**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**16. THE BAPTISM OF FIRE by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"I baptize you with water ... He shall baptise you with fire."*

*Matthew 3:11*

Water and fire! Our two great cleansing ministrants! The means we employ to rid ourselves of refuse and filth! Which is the more searching, the more powerful agent, water or fire? There are some deeply established uncleannesses for which the action of water is not sufficiently stringent. In many cases of contagious disease, if we are to rid ourselves of every vestige of corruption, there are many things which must be burnt. The germs of the contagion could not be washed away. They must be consumed away. Water would be altogether insufficient. We need fire! Fire is our most effective purifying minister, a powerful and relentless enemy of disease. In 1665 London was in the grip of that terrible Plague, the horrors of which may still be felt through the pages of Defoe. The disease germs were hiding and breeding and multiplying everywhere. Every corner became a nest of contagion. Nothing could be found to displace it. In the following year the Great Fire broke out, and the plague-smitten city was possessed by the spirit of burning. London was literally baptized with fire, which sought out the most secret haunts of the contagion, and in the fiery baptism the evil genius of corruption gave place to the sweet and friendly genius of health. Fire accomplished quite easily what water would never have attained. And so in a comparison of fire and water as cleansing and redeeming agencies, common experience tells us that fire is the keener, the more searching, the more powerful, the more intense.

Well, now, here is John the Baptist, the last and the first of the prophets, heralding the kingdom of God. John the Baptist is a great man; "among them that are born of women none greater." He is a man with a clear and definite message, and therefore with a clear and definite mission. He is engaged in the holy task of calling men to repentance, of summoning them to more serious thought, to purer and sweeter feeling, to a larger and more unselfish life. The purpose of his mission is the cleansing of the human heart. "I baptize you with water." The baptism of John is a baptism by no means to be despised, but over and above his own baptism he exalts the baptism of the Christ. "I baptize you with water ... He shall baptize you with fire." He brings into contrast the cleansing and reviving powers of the two baptisms. If you will pay heed to my counsel, be faithful to my teaching, a purging influence shall begin to work in your lives. But the cleansing influence which is created within you by my baptism has only the power of water. There is a purity, a passionate holiness, which cannot be gained by my cleansing. I baptize you with water. But when the Christ is come, He will create within you the cleansing powers which shall operate in your lives like fire, redeeming influences more thorough, more penetrating, and more vital. When He is come. He will change water into fire, a spirit of cold obedience into a burning enthusiasm, a lukewarm and dutiful disposition into the eager passion of love. "I baptize you with water ... He shall baptize you with fire."

Now let us confine ourselves for a little while to one line of inquiry, and see how this deep and powerful change might be effected. Let us approach the subject by the path of analogy. You know how immensely wide is the contrast in the effects produced upon the minds of children in presenting truth to them as an abstraction, and presenting it in a concrete dress. Suppose I begin to discourse to a number of children on some abstract truth. Suppose I use no illustrations, no analogies, no anecdotes. Suppose I decline to enshrine the truth in a vision, or picture, or tale, and present it to them as a pure abstraction -- what effect shall I produce? At the best only a vague and stupid wonder. But, now, let us take the abstract truth and wrap it up in an illustration. Let it shine through the vesture of a story. Let it be embodied in a parable or a fairy-tale. What then will be the effect? Vague and fruitless wonder will immediately pass into vivid and pointed interest. But assume still further that we present the truth, not in an interesting story, but in an actual personality, in some living, breathing man. Then the influence produced will still further be deepened; the feelings created will be far more vivid and intense.

Let me attempt to give this analogy greater definiteness by somewhat narrowing its range. Suppose I take the subject of heroism and discuss it before an assembly of children as an abstraction. I deal with it philosophically. I analyse it into its various mental and moral ingredients, and discuss the many minor attributes of which it is composed. What impression shall I create? Little or none; nothing more than an uneasy and fearful wonder. But now, instead of dealing with heroism as an abstraction, let me put it into a tale, and tell them the story of some courageous man, the story of a Livingstone, or a Damien, or a Gordon. At once the shifting, indifferent wonder changes into a keen and interested attention. But let me go further, and instead of embodying the virtue in the story of some brave man, let the truth become incarnate, let the "Word become flesh," and let me produce the heroic man himself, engaged in the heroic life. What, then, will be the result? The pointless wonder which followed the abstraction will change into a passionate admiration, which will further ripen into a fertile love. Now, what is the principle upon which all this is based? It is just this, that the operative influences which are created by truth in the heart of a child are determined in their depth and energy by the manner of its presentation, by the stage which has been reached on the pathway which begins in truth as an abstraction, and ends in truth as an incarnation. From abstraction to personality carries the feelings from chilling and indifferent wonder to eager and passionate love.

Now, see how this applies to the revelation of God and man's relationship to Him. In the earliest days God was almost an abstraction to His people. What was His name? "I am that I am." What can you make of that? There is no colour in it, nothing to lay hold of, nothing to lean upon. "I am that I am," a revelation just calculated to awake a feeling of wonder and fear. That was one of the earliest names in which the character of God embodied itself. But step by step God reveals Himself in experiences which create more definite and winsome names, and these names find their way into song and story. He begins to be known as "Refuge," as "Rock," as "Tower," as "Shield." He comes to be regarded as man's "Shepherd," because of the shepherdliness which His people perceive in the growing scope of His dealings with them. Put that name "Shepherd" side by side with the name "I am that I am." The colours of the character are beginning to emerge and shine in the growing light, and as the revelation passes further and further away from abstraction, and enshrines itself in that which is compassable and concrete, the influences created in man's heart become proportionately richer, more powerful, and more pregnant. In the fulness of time the last vestige of abstraction is removed. God remains no longer embodied in sweet and beautiful names, and renowned in song and story. He becomes incarnate in the flesh. He appears before men as the Christ. He stands out among them to be gazed upon -- a living and all-beautiful personality. The "I am that I am" reveals Himself in "Jesus of Nazareth." Don't you think that the heart-influences created by the "I am that I am" were incomparably weaker than the heart - influences created by "the Man, Christ Jesus"? Don't you think that the spiritual energy begotten by the Shepherd God would be only thin and sluggish compared with the energy begotten by the Jesus God? The different influences created in men were analogous to the different effects produced upon children by abstraction and personality. When the "Word became flesh," piety became transfused with passion; water was changed into fire. "I baptize you with water," says the prophet John. The revelation which I have proclaimed has made you penitent, humble, and obedient, and this, indeed, has helped to cleanse and save you. But my baptism has only been the cleansing of water. The Christ who comes will reveal God in Himself, in His own person; and the revelation which He will make will be so full of unspeakable glory as to create in men a cleansing energy like fire, for their hearts shall become inflamed with an enthusiastic love.

Such, I think, is the great truth involved in the text which I wish now to submit to one or two practical applications. Let me say, first -- what, indeed, has been involved in all that I have tried to say -- that passionate religious enthusiasm attaches itself to a person; and the more near and real our intercourse with the person, the more beautiful will be our holiness, and the more fiery-hearted will be our service and devotion. Just think for a moment what magnificent import this revelation in the person of Jesus had for those Jews who became His disciples. The religion of the Jews had become an obedience to precept and laws. The germ of their national faith is to be found in those ten laws which we call the Ten Commandments. But to these ten laws the Rabbis had made countless additional laws, petty, trying, and irritating laws which had come to be regarded as of equal importance with the original ten. To the earnest Jew the warm, loving purpose of God had become buried in a mountainous mass of man-made traditions. It was no longer God with whom the Jew was dealing, but this vast dead-weight of Rabbinical law. God had become to them an earth-born system, a burdensome "ism," a heavy and smothering tradition. Then came the Christ, and the first thing He did was to tear these miles of wrappages away. He cast aside the traditions of the elders. He cried to the people, "You have been looking at an 'ism,' and you thought you were looking at God. Now look on me. He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Christ lifted God out of abstraction, out of dead regulations and traditions, and presented the image of the eternal glory in His own person. God was no longer a burdensome law, but a great, near, and loving personality. And what happened to those disciples who received the revelation? Cold obedience to law was changed into enthusiastic obedience to a person. Cold and lukewarm water was changed into hot and cleansing fire. Take a modern Jew who has been converted into the Christian faith, and you will find that one of the favourite phrases by which he tries to give expression to his experience is this, "I feel a fire burning within me." What does he mean? He means that the sense of icy discipleship to law has become changed into a consciousness of warm discipleship to a person. He was baptized with water, now he is baptized with fire.

Is this in any way significant of the need of the Church to-day? Are we altogether beyond the need of this old warning, that an enthusiastic and saving and safe religious life can only be obtained by an intimate communion with the living Christ? Is the general church life of the English nation to-day characterised by devotion to an "ism" or by a personal passion for Christ? Are we trying to do by water what can only be done by fire? How is it with the character of the Church? Has she put on her beautiful garments, the garments of a holy and sanctified life? By cold obedience the Church can never be holy. If the Church would be pure the Church must be passionate. Why, the very heart of the word "pure" is suggestive of fire. It is significant of an end which has been reached through the ministry of flame. You cannot have purity without burning; you cannot have holiness without the baptism of fire. When devotion burns low, and personal piety smoulders down into a cold spirit of obedience, the "beauty of holiness" becomes an impossible attainment. But when devotion is fiery, when religion is enthusiastic, when piety is passionate, then you have the very fire from the altar of God, in which all uncleannesses are purged away. There is a phrase used by the prophet Isaiah which always appears to me to be pregnant with a profound truth of religious experience: "The Lord shall wash away their filth ... by the spirit of burning." What is to be the cleansing agency? A "spirit of burning," a baptism of fire! A flame shall be kindled in the life, and in the "spirit of burning" the moral filth, which nothing else could remove, shall be consumed away. Have we not had abundant evidence of this washing by burning in all ages of the Christian Church? There is Mary Magdalene -- poor, wretched, unclean Magdalene, possessing in herself no cleansing ministrant to cleanse away her filth. Judaism can offer a baptism of water, but the baptism of Judaism leaves the deeper plague untouched. And she comes to the Master, and the Master pities her, and she loves Him for His pity, and her love brings into her life the redeeming forces of the atoning God. That personal love for the personal Christ was the fire that cleansed her; "the spirit of burning" in which her filth was washed away. In Mary's heart was begotten a passionate love for the Christ, and her chaff was burnt up with un-quenchable fire.

It is even so to-day. In personal and in corporate life we shall be cleansed by the "spirit of burning." We march to holiness through fire. Like the air, the water, and everything else in the world, the heart, too, rises the higher the warmer it becomes. "Because he hath set his love upon me" -- what? "I will set him on high." Elevation of character depends upon warmth of affection. Here, then, is the secret why the Church is not radiant with the white robes of a sanctified life, and is still found wearing the grey, compromising garments of the world. The temperatures of the world and the Church are too much akin, and the uncleanness which is natural to the one still clings to the other. The Church must rise above the world by the elevating force of her own internal heat. The Church will lose her worldliness when she gains the "spirit of burning." She will put on an unearthly beauty when she loses the spirit of a cold discipleship, and is baptized with the fire of passionate love for the personal Christ.

But this is not all. An enthusiastic religious life is not merely the only saving religious life, it is the only religious life that is safe. The defensive energy of character is born out of its own heat. The self-preserving power of a virtue is in direct proportion to the passion with which it is pursued. Honesty, pursued reluctantly, has but little resisting power against the freezing influence of the world. Truth, pursued with luke-warmness, is easily chilled into expediency and compromise. A virtue must have a core of heat if it is to be in any worthy measure self-defensive. And that is the strength of the enthusiastic soul. A fiery heart, by the energy of its own heat, creates a self-preserving atmosphere against the devil. Cold hearts and lukewarm hearts have no protective atmosphere; their discipleship lacks inherent energy, and is as salt without savour, principle without passion, coals without fire, good for nothing! The energy of our passion is our defence! That is a striking and suggestive phrase of the Old Testament Scriptures, "Clad with zeal as a cloak" -- zeal clinging about us like a protecting vesture, our defence a garment of fire! The phrase enshrines a truth which has received confirmation in every age of the Christian Church. Lukewarmness is never safe. A man's defences are gone when he loses his zeal. A chilling and benumbing worldliness steals in upon the Church when she loses her vesture of fire. The only safety for you and for me and for all men is that we be baptized with fire, enwrapped in an atmosphere of protective zeal, and that we lay aside our cold or lukewarm discipleship to an "ism," and become possessed with a passionate, enthusiastic love for the person of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

How is this baptism of fire to be obtained? How is this spiritual enthusiasm to be kindled; and, when kindled, how is it to be kept burning? These questions are by no means impertinent. Our modern church-life abounds in externalism, in welcome and beneficent externalism; but I think there are few of us who are not sensible of a danger lest the wide divergencies of our interests should diminish and impoverish the intensity of our devotion. How did our fathers keep the fire burning? There are some words which one finds very frequently in their letters, and diaries, and sermons, which awaken similar feelings to those aroused by types of extinct species which are sometimes unearthed from the deposits of a far-off and unfamiliar age. Here are two such words, "meditation" and "contemplation"; words which appear to suggest an unfamiliar day when the world was young, and haste was not yet born, and men moved among their affairs with long and leisurely strides. Our fathers steeped their souls in meditation. They appointed long seasons for the contemplation of God in Christ. And as they mused the fire burned. Passion was born of thought. What passion? The passion which Faber so beautifully describes as the desire which purifies man and glorifies God: --

Nought honours God like the thirst of desire,

Nor possesses the heart so completely with Him;

For it burns the world out with the swift ease of fire,

And fills life with good works till it runs o'er the brim.

We live in a busy, perspiring time, with a thousand clamant calls assailing us on every side; but if we are to be possessed by this fiery thirst of desire, this enthusiastic longing for God, we shall have to provide the conditions out of which the passion is born. We shall have to make time to contemplate God. The spirit of meditation must be reintroduced into our fruitless feverishness, and our passion for things transformed into a thirst for God. Our activities are in danger of bustling out our passivities. The spirit of Mary is being exiled, and the spirit of Martha is pre-dominant. The Church must give herself time to kindle and time to pray. We must give ourselves time for visions, if we would worthily accomplish our tasks. Let us muse upon the King in His beauty, let us commune more with His loveliness, let us dwell more in the secret place, and the unspeakable glory of His countenance shall create within us that enthusiastic passion which shall be to us our baptism of fire, a fire in which everything unchristian shall be utterly consumed away.

Oh, then wish more for Him, burn more with desire,

Covet more the dear sight of His marvellous face,

Pray louder, pray longer for the sweet gift of fire,

To come down on thy heart, with its whirlwinds of grace.