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## THE FIRE SERMON

*Dwight Lyman Moody*

(1837-1899)

On Sunday night, October 8, 1871, Dwight L. Moody was preaching to a large congregation in Farwell Hall in Chicago. It was the fifth of a series of six sermons on the life of Christ. He proposed to preach the sixth and the last of the series on the following Sunday. The courthouse bell was sounding an alarm of fire, but he paid no attention to it. The people were accustomed to hearing the fire bell, and it did not disturb them much when it sounded. He finished his sermon on "What Shall I Do with Jesus?" and said to the audience:

"Now, I want you to take the question with you and think it over, and next Sunday I want you to come back and tell me what you are going to do with Him."

In a short time that congregation was a crowd of wildly fleeing fugitives, and their homes and Farwell Hall were heaps of smoking ruins.

Twenty-two years later Chicago celebrated the anniversary of that fire on a large scale, hoping to draw the largest number of people to the World's Fair by having a "Chicago Day." Mr. Moody resolved to take advantage of the circumstances to

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make October 8, 1893, a great day for the cause of Jesus Christ. Arrangements were made for an extraordinary meeting in the central Music Hall running from 10:00 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. One part of the service was to be a repetition by Mr. Moody of the sermon he had preached on the night of the fire twenty-two years before.

The hall was filled, with hundreds of disappointed people outside vainly trying to gain entrance. The meeting went on uninterrupted for the four and one-half hours, closing with Mr. Moody's sermon the last half hour.

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**I**N THE SPRING OF '71, along with Philip Phillips and Reverend (now Bishop) J. H. Vincent, I went to California, and when I came back to Chicago hot weather had come, and our audience had become scattered. I came to Farwell Hall, wanting to get back the audience, but nearly all had gone, and it seemed almost impossible to get them together again. I remember that for a number of weeks I was turning over in my mind what to do to accomplish that. I thought I would plan some kind of sacred concerts or get someone to lecture on historical events, for I thought that the gospel would not draw.

But I remember that after praying over it and getting up from my knees the thought came to me, *Preach to them on Bible characters*. Well, I had

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some six or eight Bible characters in mind, and I thought I would try Adam first. So I took Adam and looked him over, but I thought I could never talk about him for thirty minutes. Then I thought I would try Enoch. I think I took up Noah next, and I came to Abraham and had him as one of the characters. I advertised that I would speak so many nights on the Bible characters. It was not long before Farwell Hall began to fill up, and in five weeks I had the largest congregations I had ever spoken to in Chicago.

I intended to devote six nights to Christ's life. I had spent four Sunday nights on the subject, and had followed Him from the manger along through His life to His arrest and trial, and on the fifth Sunday night, October 8, I was preaching to the largest congregation I had ever had in Chicago, quite elated with my success. My text was, "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called the Christ?" That night I made one of the greatest mistakes of my life. After preaching—or talking, as I did not call it preaching then—with all the power that God had given me, urging Christ upon the people, I closed the sermon and said, "I wish you would take this text home with you and turn it over in your minds during the week, and next Sunday we will come to Calvary and the cross, and we will decide what we will do with Jesus of Nazareth."

I have never seen that congregation since. I have hard work to keep back the tears today. I have looked over this audience, and not a single one is here that I preached to that night. I have a great many old friends and am pretty well acquainted in Chicago, but twenty-two years have passed away, and I have not seen that congregation since, and I

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will never meet those people again until I meet them in another world. But I want to tell you one lesson I learned that night, which I have never forgotten, and that is, when I preach to press Christ upon the people then and there, I try to bring them to a decision on the spot. I would rather have that right hand cut off than give an audience a week to decide what to do with Jesus.

I have often been criticized, and people have said: "Moody, you seem to try to get people to decide all at once. Why do you not give them time to consider?" I have asked God many times to forgive me for telling people that night to take a week to think it over, and if He spares my life I will never do it again. This audience will break up in a few moments, and we will never meet again. There is something awfully solemn about a congregation like this!

You will notice that Pilate was just in the condition that my audience was that night, just the condition that you are in here today—he had to decide then and there what to do with Jesus. The thing was sprung upon him suddenly, although I do not think that Jesus Christ could have been a stranger to Pilate. I do not believe that He had preached in Judea for months, and also in Jerusalem, without Pilate hearing of His teaching. He must have heard of the sermons He had preached; he must have heard of the doctrines He taught; he must have heard of the wonderful parables that He uttered; he must have heard about the wonderful miracles that He had performed; he must have heard how Herod had taken the life of His forerunner by having him beheaded, and of the cruel way he had treated Him, so that he was no stranger to Jesus of Nazareth.

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But I do not believe that there is a child here today that has not a better knowledge of Christ than Pilate had. We have had more than eighteen hundred years of gospel proclamation in this dark world and have seen the fruits of Christianity as Pilate never did. He never had seen Christ in His glorified state. The only time he saw Him was in His humiliation, despised and rejected of men. The chief men that followed Christ were men of no account, men of no power, of no title, of no influence, of no position or culture. There was no crown on His brow except the crown of thorns, no scepter in His hand except the reed placed there in derision and mockery.

But we have seen Christ glorified, and we see Him today by the throne of God. We have far more light than Pilate had, and yet Pilate had his day; and I believe every man and woman have their day of opportunity. That was Pilate's day. The Son of God crossed his path that day, and he was exalted to Heaven with privilege. It was a glorious privilege that he had. If he had decided according to his own conscience, even according to his own deceitful heart, and had been influenced by his wife, Pilate might have been immortal. He might have had his name associated with that of Joseph of Arimathea, with the twelve disciples of the Lamb, and with those foremost to herald the name of Jesus, if he had only acted according to his conscience. But there was another influence about him. The world came in; political preferment came in; the Roman government came in, and he wanted to win the favor of the Caesars. There you see that weak, vacillating man in the balance, wavering. Hear his decision: "I find no fault in him."

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Did you ever notice that God makes all His enemies testify that Jesus is the Son of God? The centurion who had charge of His execution smote his breast and said: "Certainly this was a righteous man." And Judas, after having betrayed the Son of God, said: "I have betrayed innocent blood." And Pilate had to testify that he could find no fault in Him.

I do not believe that ever in the history of the world was there a more unjust judgment given than that of Pilate on Jesus Christ. After examination he declared, "I find no fault in this man," and in the same breath he said, "I will chastise Him."

The process of scourging was very cruel. They took the prisoner, bound his wrists, and fastened him in a stooping posture, and the scourge, which is made of cord knotted with sharp pieces of steel, was brought down upon the bare back of the victim, lacerating the flesh, cutting it to the bone, and many a man died under the infliction.

Pilate scourged an innocent Man, but he wanted to curry favor with the Jews and also hold with the Romans, and that was his decision. The Jews had the judge. They saw he was vacillating and knew he was the man for them, and that they could get their own way. They said: "If you let that man go you are not Caesar's friend." Then he tried to shift the responsibility. What man is there here who has not tried to shift responsibility in the same way? And I tell you that every one of you will have to decide for himself what he will do with Jesus. Your wife cannot decide it for you; no friend on earth can decide for you.

It was the custom to release a prisoner at the feast of the Passover, so Pilate took the most noted

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criminal he had and asked the people whether he should release Barabbas or Christ. He thought they would rather have Christ than Barabbas, but they cried out: "Barabbas! Barabbas!" Then Pilate asked: "What shall I do then with Jesus, who is called the Christ?" He had sent Him to Herod, but Herod had sent Him back and refused to take His life. And when Pilate found that he could not prevail, he was willing to go with the multitude instead of standing up against the current.

What we want in this city is men to stand up for the right; and even if you do suffer for a little while, the crowning day is coming. We want men to stand up against the current, not go with it, and not only to stand up against the current, but to go right against it. There was Pilate's failure.

Hardly any name in history shines brighter than that of Joseph of Arimathea. I can imagine him that night in the council chamber when Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin. "What think ye?" is the question. And then it rang out through the judgment hall, "He is guilty of death!" But away down at the other end of the hall Joseph arose, and with a clear, ringing voice he said: "I will never give my consent to that just Man's death!" How that voice must have refreshed the soul of the Son of God in that dark night, when not one stood by Him, when all cried out against Him! Oh, it is an honor to confess Christ!

There never will be a time when we can do more for Christ than now, and there is no better place than here in Chicago. May God help us to take our stand in these dark days when Christ is rejected by so many and when they are telling us that He is not the Savior of the world and are putting Him on a



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level with other men. Come out and take a high stand for Christ. Let others go on scoffing, but you come out and identify yourself with the disciples of Jesus Christ. Take a high stand—that is what we want to do. May God help you!

Pilate had come to the fork in the road. That was a memorable day in his history, for he had only to take the advice of his wife and obey his conscience. She had sent word to him, saying, "Have thou nothing to do with that just man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him." It may be that God warns you sometimes in dreams. He evidently did warn Pilate through the dream of his wife.

I was reading not long ago of a mother who had a daughter who was away from home visiting with friends. She dreamed that her daughter was murdered and buried under the barn floor. The dream made such an impression on her that she had the barn floor taken up, and there was the daughter just as she had dreamed.

I do not know what Pilate's wife's dream was, but perhaps she had a dream of the judgment day, and saw Christ sitting upon a throne with the angels about Him, and Pilate coming before Him to be judged, and she was terrified and made haste and sent word to her husband: "Have nothing to do with that just man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him." Every man who had anything to do with the murder of Christ soon came to a terrible end. Be careful about your decision in regard to Jesus, for He is to be the judge of the world.

I cannot detain you much longer, but I would like today to press upon you this one question: "What

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shall I do with Jesus Christ?" I cannot speak for the rest of you, but ever since that night of the great fire I have determined as long as God spares my life to make more of Christ than in the past. I thank God that He is a thousand times more to me today than He was twenty-two years ago . . . I made some vows after that Chicago fire, and I want to tell you that God has helped me to keep those vows. I am not what I wish I were, but I am a better man than I was when Chicago was on fire.

As I was preparing to leave London the last time I was there, I called on a celebrated physician who told me my heart was weakening and that I had to let up on my work, that I had to be more careful of myself; and I was going home with the thought that I would not work quite so hard.

I was on that ill-fated steamer the *Spree* when the announcement came that the vessel was sinking and that there was no hope. The stern had sunk thirty feet, and we were there forty-eight hours in that helpless condition. No one on earth knew what I passed through during those hours, as I thought that my work was finished, that I would never again have the privilege of preaching the gospel of the Son of God. And on that dark night, the first night of the accident, I made a vow that if God would spare my life and bring me back to America, I would come back to Chicago and at this World's Fair preach the gospel with all the power that He would give me; and God has enabled me to keep that vow during the past five months. It seems as if I went to the very gates of heaven during those forty-eight hours on the sinking ship, and God permitted me to come back and preach Christ a little longer.

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And I would like to say that if there is a man or woman in this house today living under a broken vow, you had better right here and now, in the presence of these people, resolve to pay your vows before God.

Sometimes we wait for a calamity to strike us. When the Chicago fire struck me I was in middle life—if I live out the time allotted to man. After the first I just looked around, and I cannot tell you what a blessing that fire was to me. I think when calamity comes we ought to get all we can out of it, and if God has a lesson for us to learn, let us take the lesson. It may be that God has a wonderful lesson for us. I will venture to say that many of you here have been in this same state. You that are in middle life, look around and ask yourself whether your life is what it ought to be. Come today for a little review, and look down along the way from whence you came. Do you not see some spot in your life where you have made a vow and have not kept it? You have said, "I will be a more consecrated man, or I will be a Christian"; you have stood by the bedside of a dying mother and have said, "I will meet you in the better world."

Are you going to make good that promise? Why not do so here, just at the close of this four-hour meeting? Make up your minds that you will carry out that vow. It may be I am talking to a father or mother who has laid away a little child. When that child was taken away you said: "I am going to live a more consecrated life; I will not get rooted and grounded in things below, but I will rather set my affections on things above; I will make good my vow."

It is only a little while, a few months, a few years,

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and we will all be gone. May God help us now to pay our vows in the presence of all the people. Come now, while I am speaking, and make a full, complete, and unconditional surrender to God, and say, "Here am I, Lord; take me and use me; let me have the privilege of being a co-worker with Thee," and there will be a fire kindled here that will burn into eternity. This hour, this minute, make up your minds that you are going to be from this time forth on the Lord's side. Go to your home, to your church, and give a ringing testimony for the Son of God. Go to work, do what you can for Christ, and there will be grand days for this republic and a blessed life for you here and hereafter.

*With this closing appeal Moody turned to God with a fervent prayer of thanksgiving, consecration, supplication, and tearful intercession for the city and for the multitudes coming to the fair. Then once more the people united in singing, and were dismissed with benediction, to meet again no more until all the earth shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*