The story is told of D.L. Moody as he visited two of his congregation who had been absent from the church services. Previously, they had been zealous in the work … Recently, though, they had stopped going to the meetings, and Moody went to see them. They told him they believed it’s not necessary to come to church … You can worship God in the privacy of your own home. The pastor said nothing, … but he leant forward and carefully lifted two pieces of coal out onto the hearth. Nothing was said for a couple of minutes … and then they realised the lesson Moody was showing them. … The coals burnt well when they were in the fire, - along with the other coals; but when they were removed from the rest and set on their own, they quickly extinguished.

When the Holy Spirit first prompted us to believe and we were saved, the fires of our enthusiasm were burning brightly. This was the consequence of God’s grace towards us in salvation. We enjoyed the things He had for us … including being with His people. But then, many of us experienced something of what John Bunyan was describing here. He shows us in this part of Pilgrim’s Progress how the devil sets out to dampen, - and extinguish, - the flames of our enthusiasm in the Lord. The devil tries to put our fire out!

Think about it though! … God’s grace is the only reason we are saved, and the confirmation we’re saved is that we are determined to continue in our salvation. We recognise the privilege we have in Him, - how He intervened, and lifted us out from the miry clay of doubt and unbelief, and He has set our feet upon the rock of our salvation in Him. Nevertheless, doubts and fears do surround us, and we can often succumb to our weaknesses. It is at these times we are so vulnerable. … And, using this illustration of Bunyan, it is the devil who is trying to quench the fire of God’s grace in our souls. However, to Christian’s amazement, the flames of the fire were somehow burning higher and brighter. The devil could not put the fire out!

Previously, Christian had to deal with opposition from the outside, - such as Obstinate, Pliable, and Mr. Worldly Wiseman. This is a different scenario, though … this was an inner conflict he was experiencing. This was the enemy trying to quench the fire of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the believer. Under these harrowing circumstances, how could he be able to persevere when his soul, - the deepest and most intimate part of every person, - comes under attack from the most subtle and cruellest of adversaries?! … Here is the answer … The only means by which the mighty fire of God’s grace is kept burning in the believer’s heart is because of the work of God alone. Where He
has lit the fire … nothing, - no matter how ferocious or fierce, - can extinguish it!

As I was preparing my notes, I received an email from a pastor, “Dear sir, Thank God for your prayers for me. … Do you know that I stop going to church? Do you know that I left the job [of being a pastor]? I was confused, I was sorrowful. Sir, it was not well with me. Thank God the Bible says in Psalm 30:5 that joy comes again … [otherwise] I would have said I am finished. … Satan is attacking my faith and life.” … Such a frightening experience! … And something similar was happening as Christian watched the devil trying to extinguish the fire of God’s saving grace. You see, the fireplace is the heart of the born-again child of God. Where once there was no life and no fire, now it supports the ongoing spiritual blaze that is the work of God’s grace … and its flames can never be extinguished, II Cor. 4:6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us … Jn. 1:5 the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

The devil, of course, makes no secret of the fact he sets out to destroy the fire burning in our hearts. He throws ‘bucket-loads’ of despair and discouragement and confusing thoughts upon the flames, and he tries to make us wonder how we can possibly! … How can we keep on going?! My pastor friend finished his email to me, “Truly, I don't know what to say, but pray for me. I am a confused man, now full of pain and regrets. My ministry is trying to end. It’s like God has forsaken me.” … But that is one thing we can be absolutely sure of … God will never abandon His people … Never! He will never desert us, for the God Who cannot lie has promised us, Heb. 13:5 I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee … Mt. 28:20 lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. It is, therefore, impossible for Him to ‘go back on’ His Word! He will never abrogate His responsibility to His born-again children … those for whom the Lord Jesus shed His blood on Calvary!

Interpreter comforted Christian, “This is Christ, who continually, with the oil of His grace, maintains the work already begun in the heart; by the means of which, notwithstanding what the devil can do, the souls of His people prove gracious still”. II Cor. 12:9 My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. In other words, no matter how hard the
devil tries, he will never be able to extinguish the fire in the believer’s soul … for even the devil is under God’s control!

How, then, does God achieve His will? Often we find it so difficult to see where He is and understand what He is doing. Sometimes, - like my pastor friend, - we can only recognise the dampening of the fire, - the devil’s work! … But here is what Christian is shown, - the secret as to how the fire continues to burn lies behind the wall. He had to look deeper into what was truly going on! There, he sees a man holding a vessel of oil and, - away from the glare and vision of others, - he is secretly and quietly casting the oil continuously on the fire causing it to keep on burning.

And it is explained very simply that it is the Lord Jesus Who is maintaining “the work already begun in the heart”, and that is why the devil can never extinguish it. The flames our Saviour has lit in your soul … the devil may try his worst to put out, but God will never allow him to fulfil his aspiration. This grace of Christ that pours in the oil is the same as the Spirit of Christ, Who is the Holy Spirit, Rom. 8:9 But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. 10 And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

Charles Wesley draws on this picture also,

O Thou who camest from above,
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart’s desire
To work and speak and think for Thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up Thy gift in me.
As the Saviour gently cautioned Peter, Lk. 22:31 Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: 32 But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not … Paul wrote about how he wrestled not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph. 6:12). … Yes, behind the wall, - as it were, - the Saviour relentlessly intercedes for His people, … pouring in the oil of grace as they need it.

It’s a simple picture, but a very necessary one for us to be reminded of. There are many times, - I’m sure, - when we have felt so inadequate … like my pastor friend. The fire seemed to be almost out … down to its last flicker … and yet, those are the times when we must keep going on. Paul teaches us how we have the personal responsibility to keep on working out our salvation with fear and trembling, … Fear and trembling, - not ‘flowery beds of ease’! It is hard work sometimes, - yes! - but there is no more rewarding a work! … And to use Bunyan’s analogy … it is a constant labour on each side of the wall! While we are being faithful persevering in our faith, our Saviour is ‘behind the wall’ preserving us, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12,13). … And He will not rest until He brings us home to Glory! We must ‘keep on keeping on’!

In fact, it’s like the simple childhood principle we innocently adopted when we were learning to walk … “If you fall, don’t give up … get up!” … We need to … Every generation of God’s people has needed to! The psalmist testified, Ps. 26:12 My foot standeth in an even place: in the congregations will I bless the Lord. … And Paul also wrote to encourage Timothy, II Tim. 2:19 the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.

Indeed, as the Lord Jesus stokes the fire from ‘behind the wall’, I trust we would do Him the honour of daily confiding in His grace to keep the flames burning in our souls!