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CHAPTER 1

A TROUBLED PREHISTORY

'All your Conflicts past'

From 'Soldiers of Christ, arise'

The rectory in the Lincolnshire village of Epworth was a timber building with a thatched roof – charming, comfortable and easy to burn down. On Thursday night, 9 February 1709, it burned to the ground. It was not an accident, according to the rector, Samuel Wesley – it was an attack from some of his more disgruntled parishioners, and it was not the first.

Samuel's daughter Hetty was woken by sparks falling on her feet from the thatch. While she ran to wake her mother, the rector, asleep downstairs, was roused by shouts of 'Fire!' from the road. He ran through the smoke to wake the other seven children and the servants. The maid grabbed the babies and herded the older ones, but as they converged in the hall they found themselves surrounded by flames, the front door ablaze and the roof on the point of collapse. Samuel and the maid managed to get the children downstairs and out through the back door and windows, but Mrs Wesley was too ill and heavily pregnant for such antics, so, after several attempts, she said a prayer and walked naked out through the front door.

As they gathered in the garden with the neighbours, someone heard a cry from upstairs. One of the children was missing. The five-year-old John was still in the attic where no one had woken him. Repeatedly, Samuel tried to get up the burning stairs, but they would not take his weight. In the end, he gathered the family and they knelt in prayer to commend John's soul to the Lord. Fortunately, a crowd of onlookers

had also gathered, because while the Wesleys were praying a face appeared at the attic window.

John had woken in his curtained bed, and, finding the room light, he assumed it was morning and called the maid to get him up. When no one came, he stuck his head out and found the ceiling on fire. He tried the door, only to find the landing floor alight. And so he climbed on the chest by the window and leaned across. There was no time to fetch a ladder, but one man standing on the shoulders of another managed to reach him. Just as they pulled him out, the roof collapsed inwards. There was never a hope that any of their things could be saved, but Samuel called his neighbours to come and kneel with him in prayer again to give thanks. 'He has given me all my eight children: let the house go, I am rich enough.'

This early experience of salvation had a lasting impact on John Wesley's life, quite apart from allowing it to continue. We have in it all the elements for a parable of the gospel that he was to preach: the impending fiery fate, the futility of his own efforts to escape it and the unexpected heroic rescue, which he was free – but not such a fool – to decline and to which he could contribute nothing more than putting his trust in it. The incident became a favourite children's story after his death and pictures of it sat beside Moses in the bulrushes and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt in working-class homes. Wesley came to see himself, in a favourite biblical phrase that he inscribed on one of his portraits, as 'a brand plucked from the burning', a life both generously spared and saved from hell. His mother Susanna helped to implant this idea, as so much else, in his mind. As she wrote in her spiritual notebook, 'I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child, that Thou hast so mercifully provided for, than ever I have been.' She was as good as her word.

Surveying the blackened wreckage in the morning, the rector found two scraps of paper from his treasured library, blown out of the fire into the garden, as if the visiting fiery Providence had deigned to leave him a note. They were the remnants of the two pursuits that got him through life – writing and study. The first was one of his own hymns – 'Behold the saviour of mankind', later to be a powerful favourite in his sons' mission. The other was a charred fragment of his polyglot Bible, reading, '*Vade, vende omnia quae habes et attolle crucem, et sequere me!*' – 'Give up all that you have and take up the cross and follow me!'

What kind of pastor was this who inspired arson and attempted murder from his flock? Equally, as the only evidence we have that it was not an accident is the word of the sleeping rector, we might ask what kind of pastor would automatically assume that the fire was a congregational attempt on his life.

A quick flick through the previous few generations might not only help introduce the family John was born into, but acclimatize us a little to an England that is very distant and foreign to those of us who live in it today. The country had just emerged from a period of great religious and political turmoil: a civil war between an Anglo-Catholic king and a Puritan parliament, and a 20-year Puritan revolution. Susanna's and Samuel's ancestors were on the Puritan side; Susanna's great grandfather, for example, had helped to bring about King Charles's first minister's execution by the revolutionary parliament, while her grandfather chaired its commission into clerical abuses, publishing a controversial bestseller *The Century of Scandalous Priests*. After parliament killed the king too, his son Prince Charles led a failed uprising. It was Bartholomew Wesley, Samuel's grandfather, who stopped Charles fleeing the country at Lyme Regis. The Puritan regime abolished the monarchy, episcopacy and the House of Lords, along with a host of lesser evils, such as Christmas and the theatre, and introduced the unprecedented policy of religious toleration. Meanwhile Samuel's other grandfather, John White, was one of the architects of another Puritan experiment – the settlement at Massachusetts.

Both Samuel's and Susanna's fathers were Puritan ministers in Cromwell's radically reformed Church of England, but in 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne. In an overwhelming conservative backlash, Puritan ministers were expelled en masse in 1662, including these two fathers. The same year, Samuel was born. The Dissenting churches suffered brutal repression and although Samuel's father died eight years later, Susanna's became the most influential leader of the London Dissenters.

Clearly, Samuel and Susanna were from redoubtable Puritan stock, but they both rebelled against their rebellious upbringing. Samuel was a gifted orphan and, as Dissenters were barred from university, friends clubbed together to send him to the Dissenting Academy in London at the age