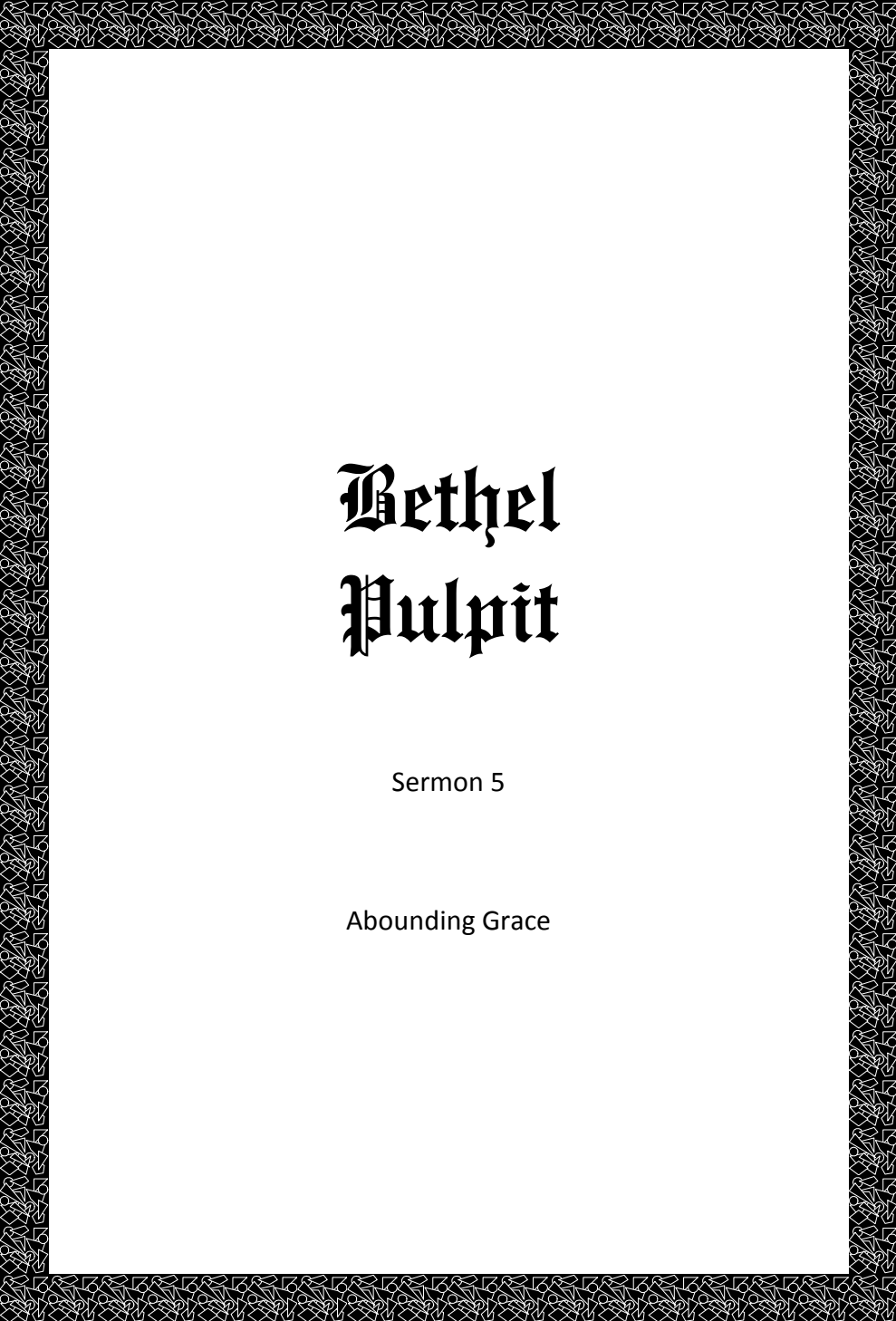




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 5

Abounding Grace

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 15th December, 1985**

Text: *“Many times did He deliver them; but they provoked Him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity. Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry: and He remembered for them His covenant, and repented according to the multitude of His mercies” (Psalm 106. 43-45).*

Across this passage we see written with the finger of God, “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” But O the contrast – the wonderful mercy of God and the sinner’s wretchedness and guilt; the wonderful faithfulness of God and the complete unfaithfulness, the complete faithlessness of the sinner!

This Psalm gives an account of God’s dealings with His ancient people in love and mercy, what He did for them, bringing them out of the land of Egypt, through the Red Sea, through the wilderness and into the promised land of Canaan. We see mercy written over it all, and of course, it is a very beautiful figure of God’s dealings with His spiritual Israel in all ages.

“Many times did He deliver them.” Now beloved friends, there was the great deliverance from the land of Egypt. That was the great deliverance. He brought them out “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” There was the sprinkled blood upon the lintels and doorposts of the house, the solemn passing over, the sparing of Israel and the slaying of the Egyptian, and then as Pharaoh pursued them – “I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil” – that great deliverance at the Red Sea.’ “They sank as lead in the mighty waters.” Now that was the great deliverance. But “many times did He deliver them.”

You can read the books of the Old Testament and they are books of deliverances. You think of Israel, those forty years in the wilderness, the trials and the problems. “Many times did He deliver them.” Then you come to the entering into the promised land under Joshua and again, “Many times did He deliver them.” Then follows the book of Judges and we read of those deliverers that God raised up for them. We think of Gideon. We think of Samson. We think of Barak. “Many times did He

deliver them.” And then we come to the days of Samuel: “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” “Many times did He deliver them.”

Now look at it spiritually as it concerns the Lord’s chosen. There is the great deliverance, that great deliverance wrought by the Son of God at Calvary, and what a deliverance it was, when His precious blood was shed and when He saved His people with an everlasting salvation! Now that is the great deliverance.

And then there is that deliverance made known in the lives of all His chosen as one by one He calls them by grace, and when that effectual call reaches their heart, then He delivers them from the darkness and bondage of sin and death, and life reigns where all was dead before. Now that is the great deliverance experimentally. Beloved friends, there will be many deliverances that you have, but the great deliverance experimentally is when the Lord begins His work in your heart in the new birth and when He calls you by His grace – just as great a deliverance as when the Lord Jesus said to Lazarus in the tomb, “Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth.”

And then as the Lord makes His goodness and grace known, as you mourn over your sin and guilt and your concern is about eternity and the judgment day, there comes that great deliverance personally when you are raised up to a sweet hope in the Lord Jesus, in His great salvation, and when your anchor hope is cast within the veil. Now that is the great deliverance, and it is the deliverance that all of us should be concerned about. “Has the Lord ever delivered me from eternal death? Has the Lord ever delivered me from unconcern? Has the Lord ever delivered me from my self-righteousness? Has the Lord ever delivered me from the world?” Now it is the great question to ask, whether we know anything of that first, great, almighty deliverance, for it *is* a deliverance, because no sinner could do it for himself. We have to say with Paul, “Who delivered us from so great a death.” But “many times did He deliver them.”

We are coming towards the end of another year. It is a time for looking back. If you take just this year, with your sorrows and your sins, with your trials and your burdens, “Many times did He deliver us.” O but if you go back beyond that to the first time when you ever had to pray, how many are your deliverances! You think of that time of great sorrow, perhaps of bereavement, and the Lord upheld you. He delivered you. You

think of that time when you were caught in Satan's snare, neither could you set yourself free, but the Lord in love and mercy set you free. Or you think of that time when you were in such trouble and you had to cry to the Lord, and He did not disappoint you. It is a profitable exercise, looking back and counting your deliverances. Paul looked back and counted so many troubles, but he said, "Out of them all the Lord delivered me." Can you look back over the past year and over the years of your life and can you remember those wonderful deliverances that God has wrought? "Many times did He deliver them."

But you see, it is an encouragement for those of you who deeply feel your need of Him this morning. Does He not promise in the book of Job to be with His people in six troubles, yea in seven no evil shall touch them? You come into this seventh trouble and Satan tells you that the Lord has delivered you before, but He is going to leave you now. Can you hold fast to a word like this, plead a word like this: "Many times did He deliver them"?

"His love in time past forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last in trouble to sink."

"Many times did He deliver them; *but*." You know, this is a terrible "but." It is one of those solemn "buts" of Scripture. "*But* they provoked Him." It is not one of those gracious "buts." On quite a few occasions this year I have spoken to you of these very gracious "buts" of Scripture, things like this: "*But* God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ." Now that is a most gracious "but," despite all the sins, ruin and guilt. And another one: "*But* God was with him." Joseph, in all his troubles and sorrows and afflictions: "*But* God was with him." And another one, when David, in the midst of most awful trials, said, "They compassed me about like bees ... *but* the Lord helped me." These are gracious "buts," but this is the opposite; it is a terrible "but." In the face of all the Lord's love and mercy and kindness to ancient Israel, in the face of His many deliverances, "but they provoked Him."

You go over all the many, many occasions, the making of the golden calf, the murmuring because of the manna, "this light bread," the appointing of a captain to lead them back to Egypt, and then over and over again in the book of Judges. And are we one whit better than Israel? Our

sins are sins against light and knowledge, sins against love and blood. When you think of what the Lord has done in providence, what He has done in our homes and lives and families, what He has done in the church of God, the way He has answered our prayers, commanded deliverance for us in our troubles, supplied our needs, fulfilled His promises, and then to say, like the old woman, “All this and Christ too.” “But they provoked Him.” And we have to bow our heads with shame, because we have provoked Him and we do provoke Him.

“Sins against a holy God;
Sins against His righteous laws;
Sins against His love, His blood;
Sins against His name, and cause;
Sins immense as is the sea –
Hide me, O Gethsemane!”

“But they provoked Him.” The psalmist says, “They provoked Him with their counsel.” We provoke the Lord with our sins. We provoke the Lord with the things that we do. But this says, “They provoked Him with their counsel.” What does that mean? Very simply, it is this: the things they planned to do. Now I want to bring this close to your conscience and mine. What about our plans? We make many plans, don’t we? But you know, so often those plans that we are making provoke the Lord, because the Lord is not in all our counsels. It should be this: you should never plan or arrange anything if you cannot ask God’s blessing on it. We provoke Him with our counsels because we plan things and arrange things and we do not ask God’s blessing on them, and we cannot ask God’s blessing on them. Also, we are so swallowed up with carnal things, and so many of the things that we are planning are carnal. We do not spend so much time planning when we can have a few moments’ quiet time to meditate on His holy Word, or planning for an opportunity for prayer, or planning to fit things in so that we can come out to chapel on that Monday evening and on that Thursday evening. We provoke Him with our counsels.

I wonder if the Lord may take our Sabbaths away from us as a nation because we provoke Him with our counsels. There is not the same reverence for the Sabbath Day with us – I mean in our chapels – as there was with our godly forefathers. There are all these thoughts and petitions

and letters and prayers about the Sabbath Day – and they are right, they are good – but it should begin here, beloved friends. What about me and my concern about the Sabbath? It does not say, “Remember the Sabbath Day to go to chapel twice.” It says, “Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy” – all the Sabbath.

We provoke Him with our counsels. God is not in all our thoughts. Is it that the Lord Jesus is forgotten? You have often heard me tell the story of the dinner which was being held to make a presentation to a station master who had retired, and when the evening came, there was consternation. The station master himself was not there. When they made enquiries, everybody had left it to everyone else to invite him, and the station master did not know anything about the banquet which was being given in his honour. He was the most important person, and he was forgotten. He was the most important person, and he was left out.

Now you girls and boys, as 25th December comes nearer once more, do not let it be that the most important Person is forgotten, that the most important Person is left out. We rejoice with the beloved apostle: “We know that the Son of God is come.” May there this year be a pressing right through the crowd. There will be a crowd. I wonder how many of us will get right through that crowd, right where Jesus is, and touch the hem of His garment.

O but we do need to beware of provoking the Lord with our counsel. Now sin will always bring sorrow. They “were brought low for their iniquity.” It was a very solemn word we read this morning: “He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.” Some of you know the solemnity of that. There is something you ask for, and you must have it, something natural, something providential. Or maybe you are not even praying, you are just asking in a carnal way, and the Lord gives you your request, but sends leanness into your soul. And some of you know the opposite:-

“Lord, deny me what Thou wilt,
Only ease me of my guilt.”

They “were brought low for their iniquity.” If we forget God, if we sin against Him, if we provoke Him – and we do – then we shall be brought low, though not in judicial anger. Those of you who have

margins to your Bibles will see that those words, “brought low” are translated “weakened, or impoverished.” Now sin will always weaken you spiritually, just as Samson when he sinned and when the hairs of his head were cut, he was made as weak as a tiny child. Of course, that was natural, that was bodily. But sin will always make you like that. Sin will always weaken you spiritually, and sin will always impoverish. Our country is in a weakened, impoverished state, and our churches are in a weakened, impoverished state. We think of that beautiful word, “In everything ye are enriched by Him.” Christ enriches, grace enriches; sin makes poor. Christ strengthens, grace strengthens; sin makes weak. “Many times did He deliver them; but they provoked Him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity.” O for more humble, true confession, to have more repentance, more forsaking of sin!

But here you see the aboundings of free grace and matchless mercy. “Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry,” because if you are a child of God and you sin against Him and sin weakens you and sin impoverishes, then affliction will come some way or another. It is an awfully solemn thing if it does not. One of the most solemn words in Scripture is that in Hosea: “Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.” It is a solemn thing if the Lord lets us alone. There is this affliction, in some way or another, in greater or less measure. Then you will cry, and “returning prodigals shall find, though they are base, their Father’s kind.”

I wonder if there is any cry going up this morning concerning our sin, our provoking God with our counsel, our impoverished condition – a cry for mercy, a cry for help, a cry for deliverance. There is a very beautiful scripture to those of you who this morning are crying: “He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry.” The Lord *is* gracious, but I like this: “He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry.” Their very cry has a voice and it is a voice which penetrates into heaven. O these cries, they are forced from your heart. O the volume of real prayer that is in them! “He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when He shall hear it, He will answer thee.”

“Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry.” Of course, we can use this word “regard” in two different ways. Those of you who study French obviously know that it is the French word

for looking at something. So in its first sense it simply means looking at something. But then, you see, there is a second sense in which we use the word. We speak of a man and perhaps say that people have a very high regard for him. That does not mean just that they look at him, but it means when they look at him it is with a measure of affection and esteem. Now it is in that second way that the Lord regards the affliction of His people. It is not just that He looks at them, but He *regards* their affliction.

Didn't the psalmist on one occasion in his affliction say, "No man cared for my soul"? And you will come into those places when people either do not sympathise or they do not understand. "Nevertheless He regarded their affliction." How beautifully you have it in the book of Exodus. "I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them."

"Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry." You know, the whole of the gospel is in this word "nevertheless." It counterbalances this awful "but." "Many times did He deliver them; but they provoked Him," and that is sad, and that is solemn, and that is awful, but that is not the end. You have this "nevertheless," and this "nevertheless" is like Moses' serpent. It swallowed up all the other serpents, all the serpents of the Egyptians. And this wonderful "nevertheless" of free grace, God's "nevertheless," swallows up all these terrible "buts," all these awful provokings, all this sinful counsel. It swallows them all up. It is like free grace, it is like the atonement:

"O grace, thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in thee."

This "nevertheless" that swallows up all these things that would oppose, all these things that would offend. "Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry."

I remember a godly old woman at Manchester telling me of one occasion when she was in great sorrow, darkness, bondage and distress, and the Lord brought her into liberty, delivered her just by the powerful application of that one word, "nevertheless." If you get that in your heart this morning, beloved, you will enjoy "a gospel day and heaven begun below." "Nevertheless," despite all your sin, despite all your guilt, all your

hardness, all your provoking, all your backsliding. “Nevertheless He regarded their affliction when He heard their cry.” The best interpretation of the word “nevertheless” is Samuel Medley’s words, “notwithstanding all.” That is what “nevertheless” means.

“He saw me ruined in the fall,
Yet loved me notwithstanding all.”

“Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry: and He remembered for them His covenant.” We often forget. One of our great sins, our awful sins, is that we forget. God remembers. God says, “Yet will I not forget thee.” Some of you can come in with that prayer, can’t you, in the fourth verse? I wonder if it touched anyone’s heart, one person here this morning, when we read it. “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit me with Thy salvation.” Well, the Lord does remember. “He remembered.” What a beautiful word that is: “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, *yet will I not forget thee*. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before Me.”

“And He remembered.” Here it is this: “He remembered for them His covenant.” The Lord always remembers His covenant. We are told that “He will ever be mindful of His covenant,” that eternal covenant made between the Father and His beloved Son in eternity in which He undertook to bless His people with all spiritual blessings in Christ, to supply all their needs, to do all that was necessary to bring them to glory, and at last to bring them safely there. And in that covenant the dear Son of God undertook to be His people’s Saviour, Substitute, Surety, their everlasting All. O that covenant is ordered in all things and sure! It does not depend on the sinner; it depends on the Surety of the covenant. And the Lord will ever be mindful of His covenant. That eternal covenant made between the Father and the Son is the rule (I use the word advisedly) by which the Lord ever works in all His dealings with all His people, and He can never forget that covenant. That is why it is a covenant of grace. The covenant of works did not last long as a way of life. It still stands as the condemnation of all the ungodly, your condemnation and mine by nature. But it was not long unbroken in the garden of Eden, because the covenant of works depended on Adam’s obedience and Adam fell, and ruined all the human

race. But the eternal covenant does not rest on you and me. It depends on Christ and He can never fail. So despite all our guilt it is a covenant of grace.

“And He remembered for them His covenant.” The rainbow was given as a token, not only of God’s covenant, but also that He would remember it. Of course initially the rainbow was a token of the covenant made between God and Noah, that He would never drown the world again. But good Joseph Hart says, “But something deeper lies there yet.” God said, “I do set My bow in the cloud ... and I will remember My covenant.”

We do not hear much about the rainbow after the book of Genesis until we come to the book of Revelation, where John saw that the eternal throne of God in heaven is completely encompassed by the rainbow, a token of God’s mercy and faithfulness and of His covenant of grace. That is what the old divines used to mean when they spoke of God as their covenant God. “He will ever be mindful of His covenant.” “My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed.”

“He remembered for them His covenant, and repented.” Now what are we to make of this? We are told that “God is not a man that He should repent,” and yet here and in other places it says that God repented. Well, never forget this, that because of our limited understanding, our finite minds, the Word of God often speaks of God acting as if a man were acting. For instance, we read in places of the Lord making bare His arm. Well, strictly speaking God has no parts. God is a Spirit. But it speaks as if a man were doing that. It speaks in places as if God were awakened out of His sleep. God never slumbers or sleeps. Now when God acts as a man acts if he were repenting, the Word of God speaks of Him repenting. With us, repentance is a change of our mind. Repentance with God is never a change of mind. Repentance with God is when He changes His way. Here the Lord is angry with His people’s sins, to all appearances about to destroy them. But God changes His way, and so the Word of God says He repented.

“And repented according to the multitude of His mercies.” You see, this is the secret of it all – not just mercy, not just mercy through blood, but the multitude of His mercies. This was David’s plea when he sinned and when he felt the guilt in his conscience. “Have mercy upon

me, O God, according to Thy loving-kindness: according unto the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.” And that prayer availed, that plea availed. It is an all-prevailing plea, mercy through blood. But this is the secret of it all, why any sin, why any sinner can be forgiven, why the Lord does not forsake His people, why He does not cut them off. It is “according to the multitude of His mercies.”

Well, beloved friends, may we be humbled. May our hearts be softened. May grace abound towards us. May our repentance freely flow. And may there be worship, may there be love, may there be obedience. “Many times did He deliver them; but they provoked Him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity. Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry: and He remembered for them His covenant, and repented according to the multitude of His mercies.”