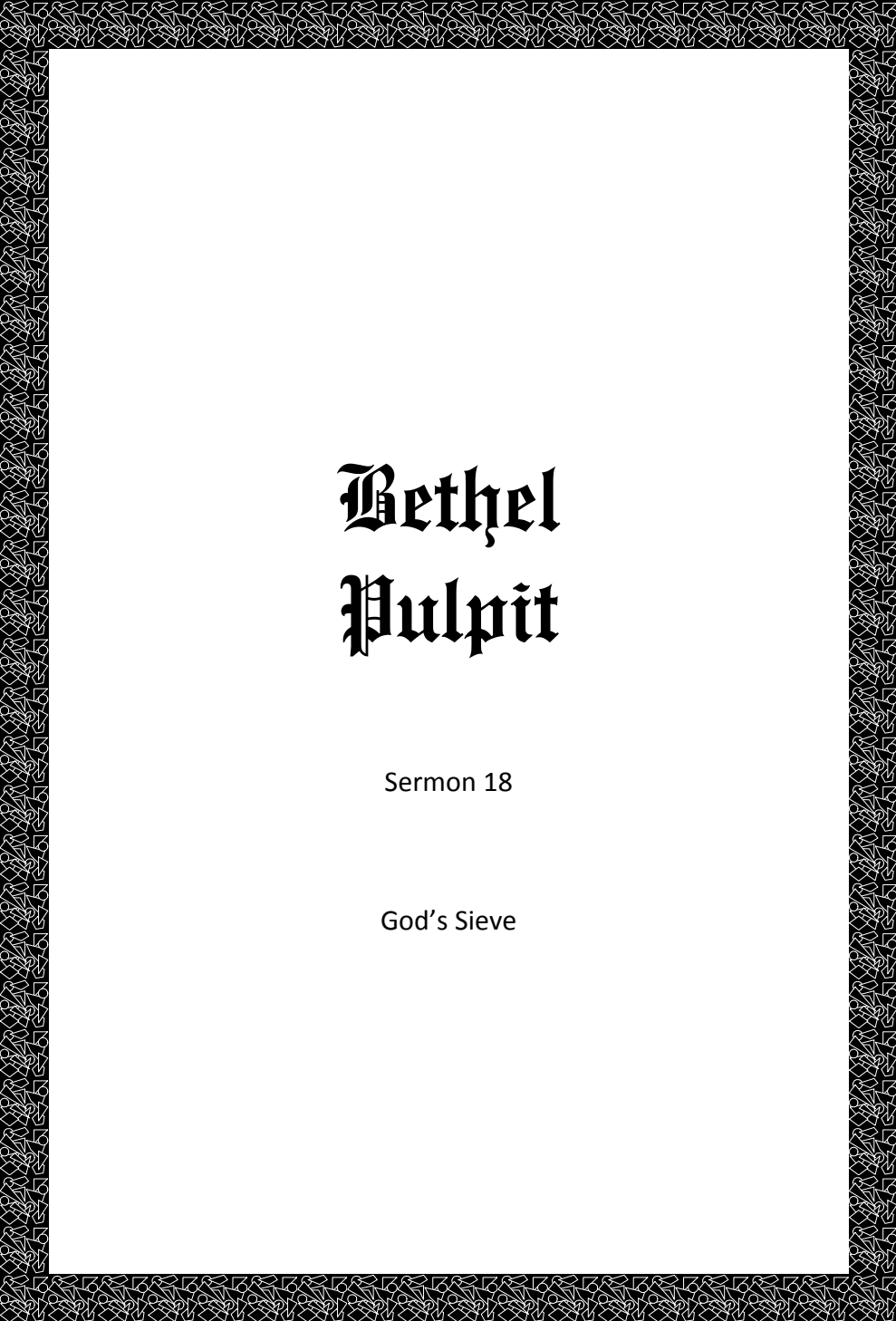




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 18

God's Sieve

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 1st June, 1986**

Text: *"For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth" (Amos 9. 9).*

God has a sieve; so has Satan. We read in Luke 22 of Satan's sieve, how Satan got even the Apostle Peter in his sieve and how sorely he was sifted there. You remember how the Lord Jesus said, "Simon, Simon" – referring to him by his old name – "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat." It is a wonderful mercy that Satan can never *have* a child of God eternally and it is a wonderful mercy that Satan can never *have* a child of God in his sieve apart from divine permission. But "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: *but* I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." Peter failed, but his faith did not fail, the only reason being the prayer of the Lord Jesus. O what a wonderful mercy if you and I have an interest in His prayer! We sometimes sing in the little hymn, "Needful Thy all-prevailing prayer," and it *is* needful.

"But I have prayed for thee." There are those times in our lives when we just feel we cannot pray for ourselves. There does not seem to be any prayer in our prayerless hearts. O to hear the Lord Jesus saying, "But I have prayed for thee"! There were two men, Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot, both chosen disciples. Both went out. Judas went out and hanged himself. Peter went out and wept bitterly. Now what was the difference? Peter had an interest in the all-prevailing prayer of the Lord Jesus. "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." And there were many, many lessons that Peter learned in Satan's sieve. "And when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."

Now that is Satan's sieve. This is God's sieve. And the difference is this: when the Lord puts one of His children into His sieve, it is to get rid of the chaff, the husk. When Satan puts one of God's children into his sieve, it is with an attempt to get rid of the good wheat, the grain. That is the difference. The Lord uses His sieve to get rid of the bad. Satan uses

his sieve to get rid of the good. Mind you, when you are in the sieve, it is difficult for you to know whether it is the Lord or whether it is Satan.

“For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve.” Now Amos was a herdsman. You will find that the Book of Amos just abounds with references to farming. Now the sieve. As I understand it, the allusion is this. Harvest-time comes. The corn is reaped, and then the good ears of corn are brought to the threshing floor and there they are very thoroughly threshed. Some heavy instrument is dragged backwards and forwards over them. They are beaten with it so that the grains of corn are separated from the chaff. And then the next process is the winnowing, and in ancient Israel the winnowing floor was usually at the top of a hill and the winnowing was done on a windy day. The farmer took a flail – the word usually used in the Word of God is a fan – and when the wind blew, he flung the heap of corn that had been threshed up into the air and the chaff, being much lighter, blew away and the good corn fell down on the winnowing floor.

But then there was this last process, the sifting. There was nothing now but the grains of corn, but they needed to be sifted to get rid of the impurities and the dust. They were put in the sieve and the sieve was firmly shaken. The impurities, the dust, all fell through the sieve onto the ground, and then were swept away. The sieve was made so fine, so skilfully, that it would get rid of all the dust and the chaff, but not the least grain of good corn would fall through that sieve to the ground. That is the allusion here.

“For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” Now beloved friends, if your religion is real, then the Lord will put you into His sieve – all of you, if your religion is real. And if you have never been in the Lord’s sieve, then you are still in nature’s darkness and death. When the new birth takes place, when a sinner by the Holy Ghost passes from death to life, the Lord puts that sinner into His sieve and He begins to sift him. You see, there is that unconcern, and he must be rid of that. There is that awful self-righteousness and pride, and he must be rid of that. There is his worldliness, his adherence to, his love of the world, and he must be rid of that. Sometimes, oftentimes, there is a great measure of carnal religion, and he must be rid of that. So the Lord

will put you into His sieve and He will sift you like as corn is sifted in a sieve. There will be some realisation of God's greatness, His holiness. You will be taught something of your unfitness, your sinfulness, your unreadiness to die. You will be brought to realise that there is a judgment day to come, that there is eternity before you, that there is heaven, that there is hell, and as the Lord puts you into His sieve, you begin to lose some of these things which the Lord would have you to lose. Oftentimes this is a painful process, because you are shaken up and down, you are shaken to and fro in the Lord's sieve. But you see the love, you see the mercy in it. Perhaps some of you can look back to how the Lord shook you out of your unconcern, how the Lord shook you out of your self-righteousness, how the Lord separated you from the world which lieth in wickedness. You saw the vanity of it all and you were brought to realise that all your natural religion was insufficient to take you to heaven, and so the Lord sifted you in the sieve.

"Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth." There was something left in the sieve. Perhaps you felt there was not much left, but there was something left in the sieve. And what was it? A little real prayer, a crying to the Lord for His mercy: "God be merciful to me a sinner," a seeking to be washed in the Saviour's blood, a desire, whatever else, to be made right and to be kept right. Now you see, this was the good grain. This was the Lord's purpose in this sifting, and it all came to this: "Thou, O Christ, art all I want."

"Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth." But you see, beloved friends, as long as we are here in the body we need this sifting from the Lord's hand. It does not seem to me there is as much of this sifting work going on today as in former generations, but are those who profess the Lord's name the better for it, or are they the worse? It is not always pleasant, it does not always please. Sometimes it is very painful, but if the Lord loves you, He will put you in His sieve and He will sift you like as corn is sifted in a sieve. There is so much pride about us and it is the Lord's will and purpose that we shall be humble. There is so much of the flesh about us, and it is the Lord's purpose that our flesh shall be abased. There is so much of our own spirit about us and it is the Lord's purpose that we shall be rid of our own spirit and that we shall know more of the Spirit of Christ. O may we be delivered from our own spirit. But the Lord will put us into His sieve to bring us there.

The Lord in His love and mercy often uses His most holy Word as a sieve, the Word read, the Word preached. Now tell me, when you come to the house of God, is the Word of the Lord ever like a sieve to you, into which you are put and you are sifted to and fro? There are many of you coming to chapel to get something. I am glad you do. But aren't there some of you who sometimes – perhaps oftentimes – go home and you have lost something? You see, there are those things we would gain, we would get. But there are those things we need to lose. There is so much carnality about us. There is so much of the flesh. There is so much of the world. There is so much natural religion, so much social religion. There is so much of a wrong spirit, so much of sin and self; and many of your best hearing times will not be when you go home with a nice, comfortable feeling or a little peace in your heart, but when you have lost something that was undesirable, when the Lord has reprovved you. You see, the whole Word of God is this sieve. “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” There will be the chastising through the Word. There will be the reprovving through the Word, and our flesh does not like it, but there is this that the Lord would rid you of, and there is something else that the Lord will take away.

“Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” It is to purify that grain, not to destroy it. It will destroy everything that is false. It cannot destroy the good grain, the good grain of faith and real prayer and a tender conscience and the love of Christ, real humility, the fear of God, that good hope which anchors only in the Lord Jesus. Now this is good grain, and it can never, never be lost, never, never be destroyed. But we have so much mixed up with it that we need to lose.

“I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve.” This also concerns our behaviour. It is easy for a child of God to slip into a careless way of walking or a God-dishonouring way of walking or a walk which is contrary to His holy Word. And the Lord will not let it be so always. He will bring you into His sieve, and the Word of God will come to you as you are shaken in it with a “thou art the man” and there will be no escape from it. If the Lord puts you into His sieve, you will try to get out of it. The Lord will not let you get out of it. How long does the good farmer keep the corn in his sieve? Until he is satisfied

with it, until the dirt and dust are shaken out of it. It may be shorter or it may be longer. You and I will try to get out of the sieve, but the Lord will keep you there until His purpose is accomplished. And if you still go on in your carnal way, “he, that being often reprov’d hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.” Seek that when you are in God’s sieve, you might profit. “I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go. I will guide thee with Mine eye. Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee.”

“I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve.” Sometimes the Lord will put your religion, your profession, your evidences into His sieve. Did you take up with it yourself, or is it real? Is it man’s work, or is it the work of the Holy Ghost? Is there real repentance or true faith? Has the new birth really taken place? Are there evidences of that new life? The Lord will put you into His sieve. It may be for a time that you are shaken and are not sure whether you are right or wrong. “Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.”

Now the Lord has another sieve and that sieve is trouble, sorrow, affliction, disappointment. And we need it. One thing I have discerned over the years is that often where the Lord is at work in the soul of a young person, very soon the young person comes into some deep trial or disappointment. Why? Because there has got to be that weaning from the world, a bringing to that point, “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee.” It is easy to sing,

“Compared with Christ, in all beside
No comeliness I see.”

But when the Lord puts you in the sieve of trouble and sorrow and disappointment, can you sing then,

“I could from all things parted be,
But never, never, Lord, from Thee”?

O be careful how you sing these high professions of assurance and faith. The Lord will put you at times in that sieve of sorrow and affliction and disappointment.

“Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” But there is another sieve, and doesn’t this try the people of God, and how many

almost perish in this sieve? This is the sieve of prosperity. You see, here are two people. They come to the house of God together. They appear to have a love for the things of God. They appear to be seeking after Christ and Him crucified. It seems that their desire is to be right, and then the time comes and the Lord puts them in that awful sieve of sorrow and disappointment and trial, and both of them stand it – at least, they appear to do. Both of them come well out of that sieve and appear to be seeking the Lord. But then, you see, “The Lord trieth the righteous.” He tries this opposite test and puts them in the sieve of prosperity. Instead of the trial of affliction, perhaps difficulty in the business, ill health, instead of everything going wrong, everything is going right, not a cloud in the sky, everything comfortable at home, no sickness, no difficulties, everything going well in the business, everything going right, everything prospering. You say, “Surely I am not in the sieve now.” But beloved, you are. See these two, and this one falls completely in the sieve of prosperity. There is no prayer now. There is no seeking after Christ now. He is satisfied with the things of this life.

“Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” The Lord keeps his soul alive in that awful trial of prosperity. You remember the man in John Newton’s day. He received a tremendous legacy – for those days it was a vast amount – and he made a special request to his godly friends, that they would seek to wrestle for him in prayer in this very great trial into which the Lord had now brought him, that he might not be left to fall, not be left to sink. You see, there are thousands who perish in the trial of adversity; there are tens of thousands who perish in the trial of prosperity.

“Lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” Then, you see, there is another sieve, and this sieve is far more terrible than any of the others, and this sieve is the sieve of death. “If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” When the last day of your life and my life comes, then in our dying hour we shall be put into the Lord’s sieve, and if you have been sifted before, O you will be sifted then, and if you have been shaken before, you will be shaken then. What a wonderful mercy it will be if you and I in the great day have one grain of real, vital godliness. It will take us

to heaven, because we shall lose everything else in that sieve, all our human connections, all our human relationships. We shall have to leave our Bibles behind then. We shall have to leave our hymnbooks behind then. We shall have to leave our chapels behind then. We shall have to leave our godly friends behind then. We shall have to leave our church membership behind then; and nothing will do except those precious grains of vital godliness. O for one grain of living faith then! O for one grain of vital godliness then! Everything else will be swept away. Everything else will be lost.

“I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, *yet* shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” O this is one of those wonderful *yets* of the Word of God, one of those precious *yets* of the Word of God. There are many of them. “Although my house be not so with God; *yet* He hath made with me an everlasting covenant.” *Yet*, despite all these things, the awfulness of them, the solemnity of them, the finality of them.

“Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” You see, the great thing in any sifting is the shaking. You cannot have a sifting without a severe shaking. We read in Hebrews 12 of a day coming when God will shake not the earth only, but also heaven. His voice once shook the earth. That was at Sinai. But the day comes when He will shake not only the earth, but also heaven, and the Scripture says that this shaking signifieth the removing of those things that can be shaken – that is everything short of a vital, saving interest in Christ. The things that can be shaken – there is to be a removing of them. O but what a mercy that the text does not end there. It continues like this: “That those things which cannot be shaken may remain.” Bless God for the things that can never be shaken. Bless God for things that can never be destroyed, even in God’s sieve. There are the eternal promises of God, those promises which are yea and amen in Christ. They can never be shaken. They can never be destroyed. Another thing is the rock foundation on which we are built. That can never be shaken. That can never be destroyed. Another thing is the atonement, the wonderful, precious, cleansing efficacy of the blood of Christ for the vilest of sinners. That can never be shaken, never be destroyed. Another thing is the eternal security of the people of God. That can never be shaken, never be destroyed.

“They may on the main of temptation be tossed;
Their sorrows may swell as the sea;
But none of the ransomed shall ever be lost;
The righteous shall hold on his way.”

“Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” The everlasting covenant ordered in all things and sure, that can never be shaken, never be destroyed. The eternal union that binds a sinner to Christ, that can never be shaken, never be destroyed. The glorious righteousness of Jesus, our justifying righteousness,

“No age can change its glorious hue,
The robe of Christ is ever new.”

“Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” O what should we do, beloved friends, apart from these solid, substantial things in the gospel? The work of grace in a poor sinner’s heart, that can never be shaken, never be destroyed. “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” “The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me.” The hope, the little hope of a child of God, even the least grain of hope, if it is real, that can never be shaken, that can never be destroyed.

“Does Satan tempt you to give up,
And call no more on Jesus’ name?
Cast not away your little hope;
Come hither, and behold the Lamb.”

“For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” Of course, this truth applies not merely to a child of God, that he can never lose the least grain of grace, that he can only lose the chaff, the husk, the dust, but it also applies to the remnant. You see, there is the great mass of professing religion put into the Lord’s sieve and when the Lord shakes the sieve, so many perish in it and prove not to be true and wholesome grain. But the remnant shall be saved and the remnant must be saved. This was a good word to me recently, “But Israel shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation.” Despite all these things, these troubles, these difficulties, these problems, these perplexities, despite all

their own sin, despite their guilt, “*But* Israel shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation.”

O the doctrine of the remnant, “a remnant shall be saved”! In God’s sieve those destitute of grace, they will, they must perish. “Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.” Not the feeblest child of God can ever perish, however great the trial, even in the last great day. It may be that some of you here this morning feel you have not got much, even that you have not got anything at all. Perhaps you have such a sense of your own unworthiness. But what a mercy if you and I should be counted even as the least grain. As John Kent puts it,

“The feeblest lamb in Jesus’ fold
Was blessed in Jesus there.”

O the security of the feeblest, the weakest of God’s children. Why? Because the sieve is held in God’s hand, and it is the same almighty hand that holds the sieve which holds the feeblest child of God safe and secure for ever. “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.” “Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.”