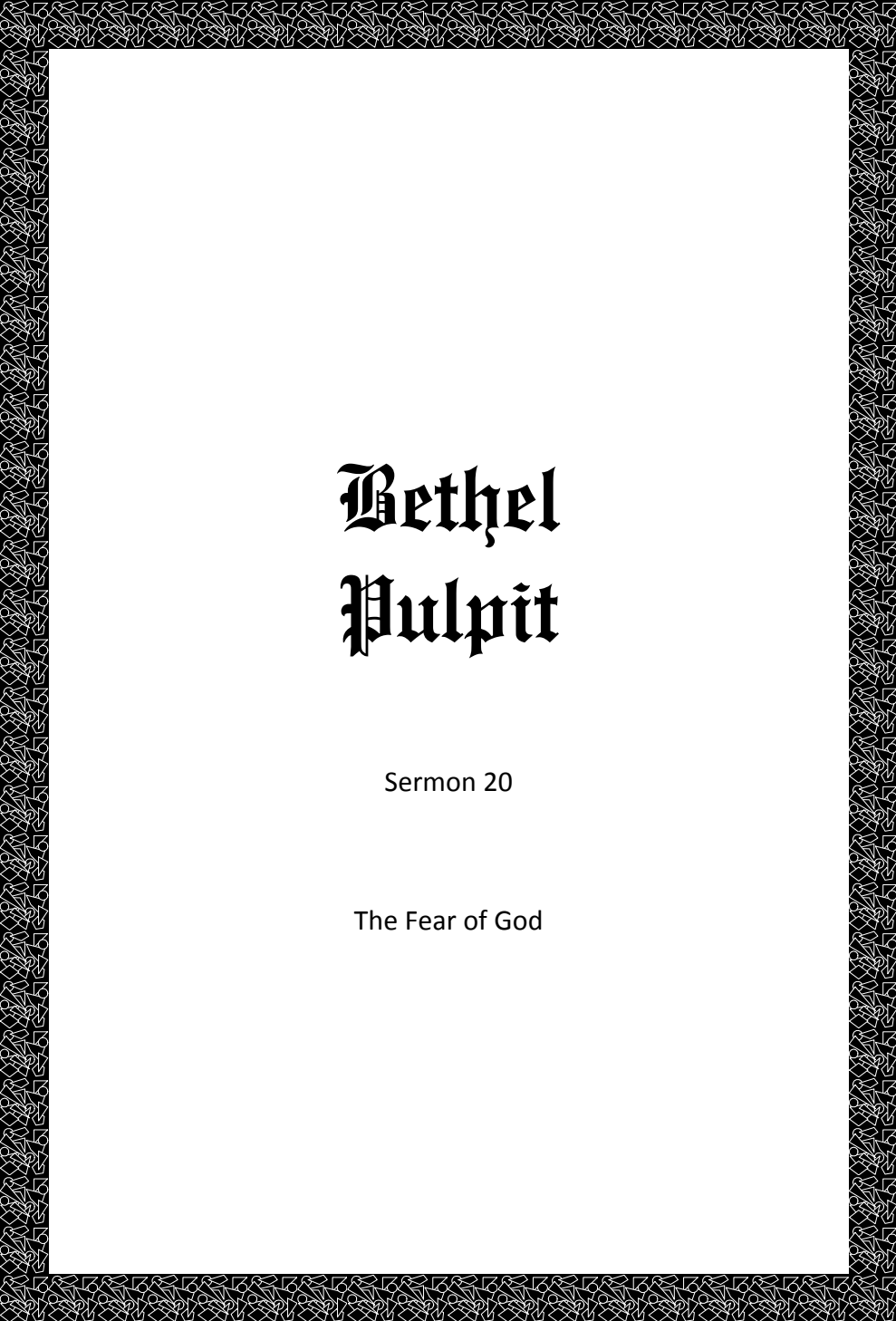




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 20

The Fear of God

**Sermon, preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 22nd February, 1987**

Text: *"But so did not I, because of the fear of God" (Nehemiah 5. 15).*

Nehemiah is specially remembered for the holy fear of God. No doubt you have noticed that various characters in Scripture are remembered for different things. For instance, Abraham for faith, Job for patience, Solomon for wisdom, and so on. Now with Nehemiah, specially is he remembered as a wonderful example of the holy, tender fear of God. He could bear this testimony: "So did not I, because of the fear of God,"

No doubt you have noticed that the Word of God lays a special emphasis on the fear of the Lord. I do not know of anything in the Old Testament which is more emphasised than this. There are so many exhortations to fear God. There are so many warnings against those who do not. There are so many precious promises to those who do. And above everything else, three times we are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning. People will sometimes dispute what there must be present in the beginning of a work of grace. There may be something present, there may be something lacking, but is there anything that *must* be present, when divine life is imparted? Well, the Word of God tells us clearly, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning." And it is repeated three times. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It means this: if you and I possess the fear of God, then we have begun in divine things. But on the other hand, if we are destitute of this holy fear, then whatever we have, whatever we possess, whatever attainments may be ours, we have not yet even started in divine things.

"The fear of God." There is such an emphasis laid on it. There is so much importance attached to it. Then what is the fear of God? Well, it is one of the graces of the Spirit placed in the heart by the Holy Ghost in the new birth. It is not something that any of us possess by nature. It is God's gift that He gives to all His people. "The fear of God." It does not mean being frightened of God. It does not mean being afraid of Him. The old divines used to say it was not a slavish fear. What they meant was this;

it was not the kind of terror a slave had so that he would do what was right in the sight of his master to escape the lash or the whip. That is a slavish fear. And the old divines used to go on to say that it is a filial fear. That is the kind of loving reverence that a child would have for a kind parent, dreading to displease him, fearing to displease him, not because of any terror of a lash or a whip, but out of love and reverence for him.

“The fear of God.” When I was a boy, there used to be a verse that was often quoted, (but not so much today). It was this:

“Fear is a grace which ever dwells
With its fair partner, love;
Blending their beauties, both proclaim
Their source is from above.”

So really, the fear of God is never entirely separated from the love of God. Mind you, the person who possesses it may not know that he possesses the love of God.

Now the fear of God is a very tender grace. It will make your heart very tender. It will separate you from the world. Like Nehemiah here, “So did not I, because of the fear of God.” It will draw you away from wrong things and it will draw your feet in right things. There is a lot of good divinity in what we sang just now, that the fear of God is “an unctuous light to all that’s right, and a bar to all that’s wrong.” That is, there may be something you would love to do, but in the fear of God you cannot see that it is right. So the holy fear of God acts as a bar to stop that way. On the other hand, there may be something that you shrink from and yet you feel you ought to do it, it is right in the sight of God. How the fear of God will draw you, impel you, in that way. It will be that unctuous light on your pathway to show you, “This is the way, walk ye in it.”

In seeking God’s leading, the fear of God is so important. You may imagine words to yourself. You may be deceived in them. But if the fear of God keeps your conscience tender, then God will see to it that you do not act wrongly. It will be something like this. If you are walking in the fear of God, if you are seeking His will and you begin to move in a wrong pathway, well your conscience will afflict you. It will be like a skilful musician. If he strikes a wrong note, he can tell immediately. He can tell that the note is wrong. So walking in the fear of God, as you walk

aright, you will have the answer of a good conscience. But when you begin to go out of the way, when you begin to put a foot wrong, then there will be that jarring in your conscience until you return to a right path, and then again, with peace in your heart, you can continue.

“The fear of God.” The fear of God will make your religion real. It will save you from the religion of a hypocrite. The fear of God will give you a daily religion, more than that, it will give you an hourly religion. It will not be something that you put on on the Lord’s day and then you lay down. You will not have a different religion for when you are in chapel and when you are in the world. It will give you a godly consistency. “The fear of God.” Also, it will make your conscience tender like this. It will humble you. It will give you a religion in the sight of God, and in the sight of God you will realise how far short you come, how often you fall, that you are unworthy, sinful and unclean. So it will lead you to the blood of Christ for cleansing. It is so important that you and I should possess this gift of God which is given to all His people in the new birth, this holy, filial fear. And it will give you such a spirit of reverence, reverence for the Lord, for His Word and for His ways. It will affect the whole of your behaviour and it will bring you to walk very carefully as in the sight of God.

Well, good Nehemiah in a special way possessed this holy fear of God. In a special way Nehemiah is a gracious example to us. He could humbly testify that he possessed it, that it affected his behaviour. “So did not I, because of the fear of God.” But before he made this testimony in this chapter, he also gave a very, very solemn exhortation to the people of Jerusalem concerning this vital point, the fear of God. This chapter, chapter 5 of Nehemiah, deals with the important subject of godly behaviour, Christian behaviour, and it is an important subject. It is one thing to come to chapel, to sing hymns, to meet friends, to hear preaching. But then you see, there is the whole of our behaviour, the lives that we have to live, the things we do, the things we do not do. Now there is such an emphasis in the Word of God concerning this, concerning consistency of conduct, concerning consistency of behaviour. It is what John Bunyan called “the practic part of religion.” He said it is the hardest part, and it is.

In Scripture there is so much emphasis on the way we live, the way we behave, the way we act. If you want to use the New Testament

terminology, “good works.” Mind you, the Scripture is very clear that they must be in their right place, that Christian behaviour must be in its right place. It is not the foundation. Christ is the foundation. But it is the building erected on the foundation. It is not the root of the tree, but it is the fruit on the branch. Things must always be in their right place. Christian behaviour is not spoken of in Scripture to gain heaven, to merit heaven. It is not to win anything, to deserve anything. That is entirely through God’s free grace and mercy, entirely through the blood of Christ. But rather this godly behaviour is springing from it, from union with Christ, and it is the evidence of it. The godly reformers made this their testimony. They said that the sinner is saved by faith alone. They meant that man’s works had nothing to do with it. They said that the sinner is saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never found alone. Now that is just it. Salvation is entirely of grace through faith. But there will always be something springing from it, always something flowing out of it. So you see, chapter 5 of Nehemiah is one of the important chapters in Scripture concerning godly behaviour and the root principle of it, the tender fear of God of which Nehemiah himself is such an eminent example and concerning which he could give such a testimony.

Now you see, Nehemiah was building the walls of Jerusalem. The walls of Jerusalem had been broken down, destroyed. The city was at the mercy of its enemies and Nehemiah’s great work was the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. In this interesting book we read how each of the different ones helped, each one repairing his own piece, until the building of Jerusalem’s walls was complete. But in chapter 5, good Nehemiah realised this, that if there were enemies without, there were enemies within and what was the use of Jerusalem’s walls being completely repaired if inside the city there was ungodliness, there was inconsistent behaviour? Now he heard the reports of it and it grieved him. He gathered the people together and he said, “It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God?” (verse 9.) It is no use having a strong city with great fortifications if there is an enemy within the city. What is the application of it to the church of God? What point is there having the church of God with its heavenly doctrines and its articles of faith, if there is inconsistent behaviour in the members?

“It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God?” What was the sin in Jerusalem at this time? Well, we are told that

there was a dreadful dearth. Food was exceedingly scarce and because of that it was exceedingly dear. There were many people in Jerusalem with large families and they could not afford even bread enough to eat. What did they have to do? Borrow from their wealthier brethren who loaned them the money but charged an exorbitant interest. They tried to get every penny they could from their own brethren so that the poor people had to mortgage any houses, any land that they possessed so that they might buy corn to live and not die. It went ever further than that. Many of these poor people had to sell their own children as slaves in order that they might live and not die. And you see, there were these people in Jerusalem who were even willing to take their brethren as slaves.

“I was very angry when I heard their cry” (verse 6) – that is, the cry of those who were distressed, who came to Nehemiah. “I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words.” It has been graciously remarked – I think it was Matthew Henry who made the remark – that you find that Ezra and Nehemiah had completely different temperaments. If Ezra ever heard anything, it grieved him and made him sad and he wept. If Nehemiah heard of anything, it made him angry. Ezra would, in fear and trembling, fall down before the Lord. Nehemiah would begin to rebuke the people. And that godly commentator remarked how the Lord has used the different temperaments among His people to His glory. Beloved friends, I do not think people would put up with Nehemiah today. There are a lot of things he did that people would say was going too far. One person aggravated him so much that he seized him by the beard, and another one, he chased out of his presence. You would say, “Surely Nehemiah was going too far in this.” Nehemiah was a sinful man, but a sinner saved by grace. But he knew something of the spirit of the Lord Jesus: “The zeal of Thine house hath eaten me up.” Where are these Nehemiahs who have such a wonderful zeal, these who are angry when they see the name of the Lord dishonoured? There is such a thing as righteous anger. But we need to discern between the two. How long is it since you have been angry when you heard of the Lord’s name being dishonoured?

“And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words, Then ... I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers” (verse 7). O for these fathers in Israel who have grace to give a loving rebuke for the honour and glory of God. “I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye

exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them.” Now the contention he made really was this: so recently they had rejoiced at being brought out of bondage in Babylon and now they were putting themselves in bondage to one another.

“Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer” (verse 8). There was grace. You can see a lot of grace in this man of God, Nehemiah, in chapter 5. But you can see plenty of grace in the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I take it that chapter 5 of Nehemiah tells us what real repentance is. When Nehemiah rebuked them, and he was angry with them, they did not defend themselves and they did not say there were certain mitigating circumstances. They held their peace, and they found nothing to answer. Here was this great gathering of the people. Here was this great man of God, the governor of Jerusalem, and he was angry with them. He rebuked them. What do they do? What do they say? Nothing. They held their peace and they found nothing to answer. And it was then that he spoke this very clear, solemn word concerning the fear of God. There are two texts on the fear of God in Nehemiah chapter 5. The one I have read to you, Nehemiah’s testimony concerning himself, and the other, Nehemiah’s testimony concerning the people: “And I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God.” And he gives one special reason, and it is a very solemn reason, and it comes often in Scripture: “because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies.” When God’s people dishonour Him, when God’s people do not walk in His holy fear, then His name is reproached by the heathen our enemies. There is a very telling word in the case of Abraham and Lot. You read about the disputes between the herdsmen and the quarrels and the divisions and then it is added, “And the Canaanites dwelt in the land,” the implication being clear, that they witnessed this and they reproached the name of the God of Abraham and the God of Lot.

“It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?” And then good Nehemiah exhorted them, lovingly exhorted them, to restore to their brethren the land, the vineyards, the oliveyards, the houses, the money, the corn, the wine, the oil, all that they had exacted of them. You know what he said, and it is a vital word in repentance. He said, “Do it even today” (verse 11). There is a worldly expression that “tomorrow never comes.” Nehemiah said, “Do it even today.” Now beloved friends, this is what you

seek. This is repentance. “Then said they, We will restore them.” O you see the grace, falling completely before this angry admonition of Nehemiah the governor.

“Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest” (verse 12). Now that is grace. O for grace to fall before divine chastisement, before divine correction, before divine rebuke. How long is it since you came to chapel and you had to go home and put something right that was wrong before? I do not want to weary you by telling the same old stories, but let me remind you of that one you have heard so often, of the woman with the little shop who said she had heard the most powerful sermon she had heard in her life. They asked her what the text was, and what the subject was. She could not remember, so they said, “Why was it so powerful?” “O,” she said, “I could not get home quickly enough to destroy the light weights in my shop.”

I think most of us would have left it there, but Nehemiah did not. He laid it on quite heavily with them. He called the priests and “took an oath of the people that they would do according to this promise” (verse 12). They had said they would do all that he had said, so he got the priests to come along and required the people to take a solemn oath that they would do it. “Also I shook my lap” – a kind of symbolic action – “and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise” (verse 13). And do you know how the people reacted to this? They did not say, “Nehemiah, aren’t you going too far?” “All the congregation said, Amen.” Did you notice what follows next, a most remarkable word? “All the congregation said, Amen, and praised the Lord.” There is such an experience of being brought to solemn repentance, to solemn confession, to solemn acknowledgement, to solemn restoration, and praising the Lord for it: “O the love of God that He did not leave me to wander out of the way, to go on in this careless state! O the love of God that He sent a faithful man like Nehemiah to find me out and to rebuke me and to exhort me! “All the congregation said, Amen, and praised the Lord.”

Now this is the climax of it all: “And the people did according to this promise.” It was going to hurt them. It was going to cost them a lot. But they completely acknowledged that they were wrong and completely

put everything right. That is grace. It is the spirit of Zacchaeus: “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house.”

Well, that is the one half of it, the outworking of the holy fear of God in these most solemn rebukes that Nehemiah gave to the people of Jerusalem and the grace with which they received them and the repentance with which they were blessed, the grace of humility with which they fell under them. Then Nehemiah gives his own little testimony. He was able to speak in this way because he himself had walked very carefully in the fear of God. Now he tells us his own experience. He said that there was an allowance that was always given to the governors, and all the previous governors had taken it. That allowance was the bread and the wine and forty shekels of silver. Some have thought that it was forty shekels of silver a day. Nehemiah tells us that as the governor of Jerusalem, he had a vast expense and he did not come short in fulfilling his office. Each day he had to provide for one hundred and fifty people to sit down for a meal. He gives this just as an example of part of his expenses as a governor. There were one hundred and fifty people as well as visitors who might come, and for this it was necessary every day that there should be a complete ox and six sheep and also fowls as well as the store of all sorts of wine. Now you can see what a heavy expense the governor had. You can see why the former governors had taken an allowance – if you will, the expenses or a salary to which they were completely entitled. They were not doing anything wrong. They only took that which was their right.

Nehemiah says, “But so did not I, because of the fear of God.” Now you know, beloved friends, this little verse I have read to you, this part of a verse, I should think among Strict Baptists in our chapels there is not a better known Scripture. “So did not I, because of the fear of God.” But it is not usually given the Scriptural application. It is only given half of it. Now it is a wonderful principle. Here is some awful temptation. “So did not I because of the fear of God.” Here are young people, a girl or a boy going into all kinds of temptation, worldliness, sin, and the example of Nehemiah is put before them, “So did not I, because of the fear of the Lord.” It is usually spoken of as separation from sin, and correctly so, and, separation from the world, and correctly so, because the fear of God will separate. “So did not I, because of the fear of God.” Now that is perfectly right, perfectly justified, as far as it goes.

But never forget that when godly Nehemiah said this, he was not speaking of some sin, some immorality, some worldliness. He was speaking of something lawful, something which was his due, something which was his right. But because of the difficulties in Jerusalem, because it would mean that some of God's people would have to suffer, because it would be hard for them, "So did not I, because of the fear of God." He forewent the things which were rightly his because he believed it was more for the honour and glory of God. Now there is not much of this religion about today, is there? The Lord Jesus spoke of it like this, going the second mile. "If any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain." Now how much second-mile religion is there today, going that extra mile for the honour and glory of God?

Of course in its fullest sense, the gracious example of this is not Nehemiah but it is the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. O how far He went in His love to His people! How far He went in honouring and glorifying His God and Father in heaven! We think of that occasion when He even humbled Himself to pay the tribute money. Why, He said to Peter, "Then are the children free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend," That is the spirit of the gospel. That is the spirit of Christ. "Then are the children free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend."

"But so did not I, because of the fear of God." "The former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver." "But so did not I, because of the fear of God." "Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor." "So did not I, because of the fear of God." He gives this account of the awful expense he had. "Yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people" (verse 18). O you see, this is the tender fear of God. It hurt him. It cost him something. It was a sacrifice. O but he did not want in any way to lay the slightest burden on the suffering people of God and he did not want in the slightest way to bring dishonour on the holy name of his God and Saviour. "So did not I, because of the fear of God."

Some of you may think the last verse of the chapter (verse 19) a bit legal. Some of you may think that Nehemiah had a good opinion of himself. “Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.” But you have not to think like that at all. You have not to read it like that at all. It was this. Nehemiah realised that he had made an amazing sacrifice. He had given up so much for the sake of his God – in present-day language, thousands of pounds. But “think upon me, my God, for good.” “If I have any need, Lord, I believe Thou wilt supply it. I believe I shall not come short in this. I have done it lovingly, willingly, but, “think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.” Do think upon me for good.” And secondly, pre-eminently, Nehemiah speaks in the spirit of our hymnwriter when he says,

“One smile, one blissful smile of Thine,
Thou dearest Lord, outweighs them all.”

“Think upon me, my God, for good.” “It has been a trial to me, a sacrifice to me, I feel it was right. But if only Thou dost condescend to smile upon me and to bless me, then Lord I count it as nothing.” Like the apostle, “For whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in Him.” This is the fear of God in gracious exercise. This is the fear of God in a godly example. “So did not I, because of the fear of God.” “Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.”