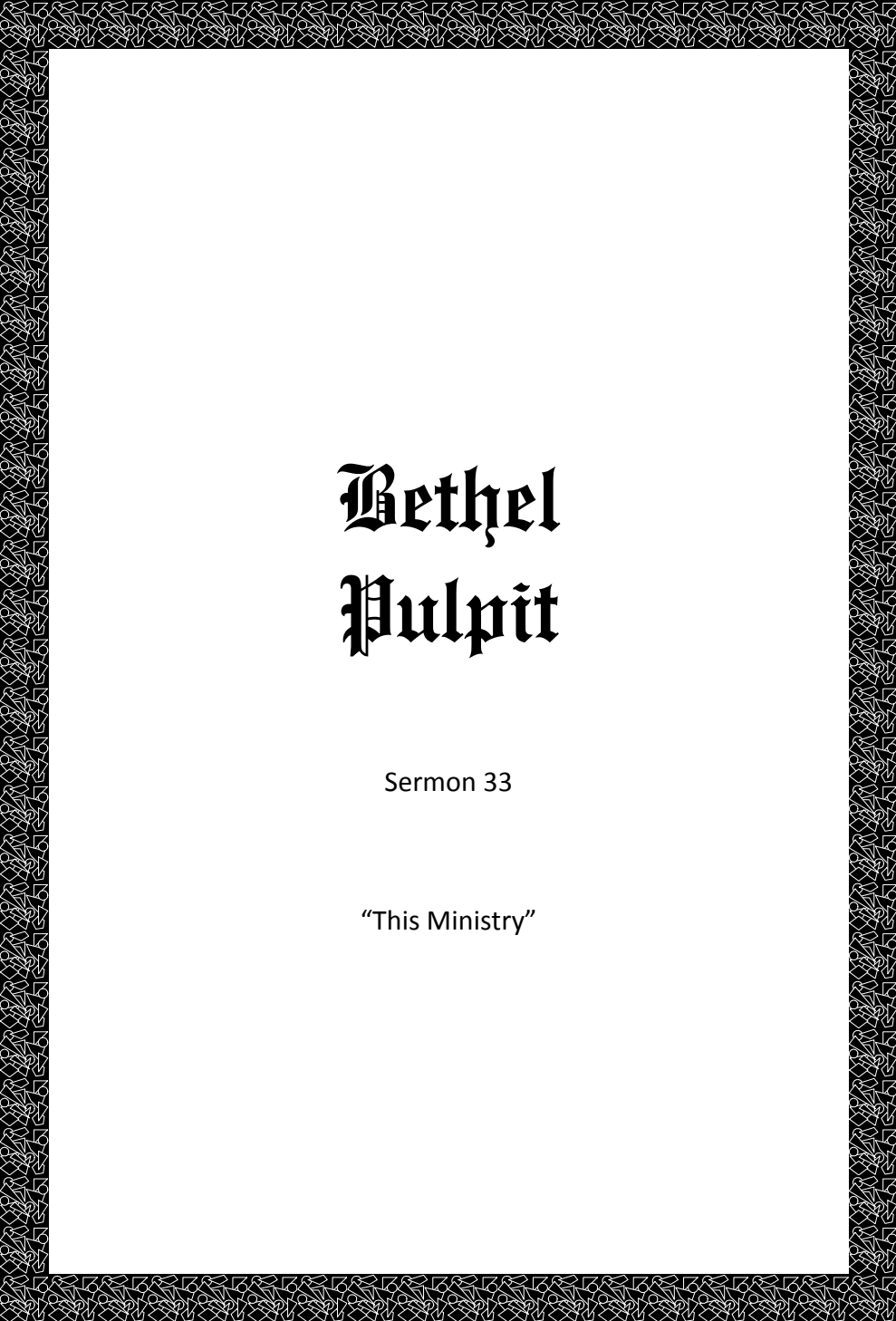




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 33

“This Ministry”

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 24th March, 1985**

Text: *"Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not" (2 Corinthians 4. 1).*

Paul always had that realisation that he had received his ministry from God, that is, that God had sent him. He was very conscious of his utter and complete and entire unworthiness and unfitness. He realised that his call to be a preacher was just as sovereign as his call by grace. So often he speaks of this point, on the one hand his own unworthiness and unfitness, but on the other hand the glory of the ministry that was committed to him. He had a very lofty conception of his work, a very lofty conception of the gospel ministry.

On one occasion he put it like this: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." He realised and freely confessed that he was but a poor, weak, earthen vessel, easily chipped, easily cracked, easily broken, not worth much, but capable of carrying this precious treasure of the gospel of God's grace.

In another place he puts it like this: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." He felt that he himself was less than the least, but he realised what a high calling it was – yet that it was all of grace – to preach to sinners the unsearchable riches of Christ. "This ministry."

Now the point here with Paul was this, that though this ministry he had received was from heaven, though he had been divinely commissioned by God, and though he was more than an ordinary preacher – he was an apostle – yet because of his own weakness on the one hand and because of danger and opposition on the other hand, there was always this possibility of fainting. He trembled lest he should faint, and he prayed that he might not faint.

Then he tell us at the end of the chapter that he does not faint. “For which cause we faint not.” What cause? “For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God.” But that does not mean that though Paul was commissioned to be an apostle by God, there would not be difficulties, there would not be opposition. There were these things. This is his testimony: “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed” – not crushed, as it means. “We are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”

Really, there are four things in this verse that I want to trace out with you this morning. I am not going to make a formal four-fold division, but I want to trace these four things out.

First of all, there is “this ministry.” Now I am not going to confine that to Paul, and I am not going to confine it to preaching. I believe that in greater or less measure every one of God’s people has a ministry. So first of all there is “this ministry”; then secondly the danger, the possibility of fainting because of things without and things within; then thirdly this point that we do not faint and that we shall not faint; and fourthly, the reason for it, nothing short of divine mercy. So I want to bring these four things before you: this ministry, the danger of fainting and the cause of fainting, we faint not, and the reason. “Having received this ministry.”

Now first of all, “this ministry.” When we speak of the ministry, we tend to think of preaching. The verb “to minister” really means “to serve,” so “this ministry” means “this service.” For instance, we read of Joshua that he was Moses’ minister. That does not mean that he preached to him. It means that he was his servant. Also, we read of the Lord Jesus: “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto.” That does not mean that when Jesus came He was not going to be preached to. It means He did not come that other people might serve Him, wait on Him. He took upon Himself the form of a servant. “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.”

Of course, the ministry of the Lord Jesus was preaching, but there was much more in it than just preaching. Part of it was when He took a towel and a bason and washed His disciples’ feet. “This ministry.” “Ye call Me Master and Lord: and ye say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s

feet.” So you are called to this ministry, to wash the saints’ feet. That is given as one of the qualifications in one of the pastoral epistles, speaking of these godly women, “if she have washed the saints’ feet.”

Now I do not take that to be a third ordinance, along with believers’ baptism and the Lord’s supper. In some churches they practise feet-washing. As month by month they keep the Lord’s supper, so once a year they practise feet-washing. We do not believe that. We believe that is carnalising the teaching of the Lord Jesus. Like the woman at the well, when the Lord Jesus spoke of living water, she wondered how she was going to get that water from Jacob’s well. There is this ministry, and this ministry He commends to all His people: washing the saints’ feet – with your tears, with your prayers, and with your help. “This ministry.” Now do you know what it is, washing the saints’ feet?

“The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.” Part of His ministry was laying down His life for His people. “Well,” you say, “the saints cannot do that.” “He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” “This ministry.”

The great point with Paul was this, that no sacrifice was too great for him to make for the ministry that he had received at the hands of the Lord Jesus. He says, “Neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus.” “This ministry.” It is for Jesus’ sake. It is for His honour and glory. It is as sweetly constrained by His love. Who was it who said, “If Christ be God, and I know He is, and if He laid down His life on the cross, and I know He did, and if it was for me, and I trust it was, then there is no sacrifice too great for me to make for Jesus’ sake”? “This ministry.”

Now every person who fears God is called to have a part in this ministry. Not all are called to be public figures, and not all are called to preach. But all without exception are partakers in this ministry. I believe that Christian mothers have a ministry in the bringing up of their children. “This ministry.” Now may you look upon it like that, not just as something that is hard, and perhaps even a bother, but may you view it for Jesus’ sake. May you view it as received from His hand. May you view it as a ministry. “Take this child away, and nurse it *for Me*, and I will give thee thy wages.” “Therefore seeing we have this ministry.” And many of

you have this ministry, and you are called to exercise it for Jesus' sake and in His holy fear. "This ministry."

With some, it is caring for the Lord's aged people. Now this is a ministry. It is not just something to be done as a job, or for financial gain, or as time-serving. "One is your Master, even Christ." It is a ministry. There is a serving of God in His people.

"Well," you say, "what about the dear aged ones? Are they beyond this ministry?" No. They have a different ministry. With many of the aged saints, I believe that their ministry is three-fold, and solemnly many of them fail to exercise it. It is a solemn thing that with many of God's people, their last days are not their best days.

Now what is the three-fold ministry of God's aged saints? First of all, it is to set a godly example, so loving, so kind, so tender, reflecting the beauty of their Lord and Saviour. Secondly, it is the ministry of prayer, intercessory prayer. A godly Scottish minister visited an invalid. She was so downcast because she just lay helpless on her bed day by day. He could not get through to her, amidst this downcast condition. As he was going, he turned back and said, "Don't forget to pray for me" – the very opposite of what she thought he would say. Do you know, the Lord caused it to break through, and her face was wreathed in smiles. You see, there is the ministry of intercession. And the third thing is the ministry of speaking a word in season, a kind word, a helpful word, an encouraging word, a reproving word. "Therefore seeing we have this ministry."

Some have had a ministry of suffering. What a strange word that was that is said of Peter: "Signifying by what death he should glorify God"! Peter had a ministry, even in his suffering, and even in his death, by which he should glorify God.

How many a person has had a ministry of looking after aged parents, and at times found it so trying. There was a young lady several years ago down in the eastern counties. Now, as I remember the story, she said to her father one morning, "If you don't mind, I won't go to hear you. I will go to hear Mr. Gascoigne." Her father said, "You go." She had felt clearly called to serve God in a special way and everything had gone wrong, and she was completely disappointed. She went and heard Mr. Gascoigne and that morning his text was this: "Take this child away, and

nurse it for Me, and I will give thee thy wages.” It impressed her very much. When she got home, there was a new-born baby in the house. I cannot remember exactly whether the mother had actually died or whether she was so ill that she could not do anything. Before the young lady had time to tell her father what Mr. Gascoigne’s text was, her father put the child in her arms and said, “Take this child away, and nurse it for Me, and I will give thee thy wages.” She had felt that “this ministry” was going to be the opposite, but for many months she was given this ministry of bringing up this tiny infant.

Some of you in special ways have received a ministry concerning the house of God and concerning the things of God. The diaconate is a ministry, serving the people of God, and the work and the qualifications the Lord has clearly laid down. There are the various things concerning the church of Christ, concerning the good of His people.

But you know, I believe it is everything. You say, “What, my business?” The godly Puritans did not use the word “business” or “job.” “Calling” was their word. They dignified it by that. If you read the old Puritan divines, they would speak of a man, by calling a farmer, or by calling a merchant. And their point was this, that the work that that man was doing was, or should be, by the clear calling of God. Not just a minister called to preach, but a person in whatever he was doing, called by God to do it. You say, “Even a little servant girl?” I was trying to think of George Herbert’s well-known hymn. He speaks of the word, “For Jesus’ sake,” and he says something like this:

“A servant with this clause” – the clause being “for Jesus’ sake” –

“Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.”

That word “for Jesus’ sake” felt and received in the heart makes drudgery divine. “For Jesus’ sake.” “Looking unto Jesus.” I do feel that burden, that constrained by the love of Christ, for Jesus’ sake, each of you who fear God might have this in your heart, how you can serve the Lord in His people. It may be a little letter or note to someone, a visit, or even a kind word.

Now you are not going to charge me with legality, are you? The epistles abound with these truths. That is why I read Colossians chapter 3. There are two words especially in it: “Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.” And the other: “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.” May that be emphasised, underlined, *“As to the Lord, and not unto men;”* knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.”

I remember feeling the power of that once: “Ye serve the Lord Christ.” It came like this: if people serve some eminent lord, how they glory in it. But “ye serve the Lord Christ.” And don’t forget, this was spoken to slaves who were being cruelly treated and receiving no wages at all. But Paul reminds them: “Ye serve the Lord Christ” – not that cruel master. Now what is the Lord laying on your heart?

Now the point that Paul applies here is the tendency to want to give it up, or sink beneath it, because it is too hard for us. Now that fear of fainting, or perhaps I should say sometimes willingness to faint, is because of things outward and things inward. You see, there may be opposition. You may be persecuted. One thing is clear. You are sure to have difficulties. If God has given you this ministry, then Satan will oppose. Do not be surprised, do not be afraid, if everything seems to be going wrong. There will be the troubles, the perplexities, the problems, the difficulties, and sometimes everything will be so hard, the going will be so difficult.

But you see, it is not just things without that make you faint. You know, we have got a carnal unwillingness that seeks ease, haven’t we? Now that is one thing which will make us ready to faint at times. Sometimes there is bodily weakness and tiredness, and sometimes there is the trial of faith. Sometimes there is frustration. O but sometimes it is this, a sense of our complete unworthiness, a sense of our sinfulness and guilt and a sense of our failure. You look at this ministry, whatever it is, and as you look at it, you feel you have absolutely and utterly and completely failed in it, and you feel like this:

“My best is stained and dyed with sin;
My all is nothing worth.”

You feel your complete unworthiness to serve the Lord Christ, such a good Master and such a poor servant. Yet lovingly, kindly He speaks this word to you: "Occupy till I come." "Therefore seeing we have received this ministry."

O but the tendency to faint! "If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small." O that tendency to give up! That tendency to go back! That readiness to sink! At times that sense of complete unworthiness. You have come to the end of everything, the end of all your exercises.

Paul says, "We faint not." In a sense, it is a commandment. The Lord tells you that you are not to faint, even if He chastises you for your sinful backwardness in this ministry. You know, if the Lord gives us a little loving reproof, we are ready to give up. ready to sink, ready to faint. "Nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him." There is a commandment here that we are not to give up.

Look at dear Elijah as he was ready to give up and he had come to the end of everything. He said, "I only am left." And the Lord spoke two words to him, and some of us have known what it is to hear those two words: "Go, return."

"Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not." Beloved friends, that is the secret of it: mercy. O that mercy as it dwells in Jesus! Mercy in all its tenderness, mercy in all its fulness and freeness, mercy as it abounds!

Now there are one or two different views of this. You have this ministry, whatever it is you have received of the Lord, whether it is something spiritual, something natural, something in your home, in your family, in your life or in your business. Everything seems to be going wrong. This is the point: you have received mercy. You have got to remember what you have received from God's hand, and what you deserve. As a sinner you deserve to be cut off, to be cast into hell. But instead of that, it was mercy in receiving you, mercy in forgiving your sin, mercy in raising you up to a sweet hope in Jesus, mercy to you in all your unrighteousness.

Now because you have received that mercy, you are not allowed to give up. Out of holy gratitude, out of love to the Redeemer, you are not

allowed to give up. “Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.” “As we have received mercy” – *because* we have received mercy – “we faint not.”

There is another view of it, a completely different view. That is not just receiving mercy at the beginning when as a sinner near despair you came to Jesus’ feet. But it is this: receiving mercy day by day and hour by hour – the Lord’s love, His kindness to you, the Lord remembering you, the Lord helping you, the Lord supplying your need, the Lord making His strength perfect in weakness, the Lord granting you grace all-sufficient. Now as you receive that mercy, you faint not. Mercy to encourage you, mercy to help you, mercy to uphold you, mercy to strengthen you mercy to enable you to press on. “Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.”

This is not some innate ability: it is the mercy of God. We fail; you fail; I fail. God’s mercy never fails. O the wonders of unfailing mercy from an unfailing Saviour and an unfailing Friend! His promise unfailing! O the mercy of God in supplying His people’s needs, the mercy of God in bearing with them, the mercy of God in upholding them. “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” Now that is a mercy you receive. It is receiving mercy daily, hourly, and through this mercy you live, you do not die. Through this mercy you stand, you do not sink. Through this mercy you continue, you do not give up. O to hear the Lord Jesus whispering when we are ready to faint, “Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations.” Why did you continue? Because you received mercy and fainted not. “And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as My Father hath appointed unto Me.”

“Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.” That is why the righteous shall hold on his way, because of this mercy. As David so beautifully puts it, “With favour wilt Thou compass him as with a shield” – completely surrounded with the favour, the mercy of God. It does not fail. “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness.” So you have to continue, you will continue. “Go, return.”

“Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.” Paul gives us just a little clue as to this “fainting

not.” He says, “We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen” (verse 18). If you look at the things that are seen, you will faint. You look at yourself, your unworthiness, your wretchedness, your sin, your lack of resources, your own weariness, your own tiredness, your lack of strength. You look at Satan, your enemies, your foes, the difficulties, the perplexities, the troubles; and if you look at these things, you will faint. Paul lovingly tells you that must not look at those things. You have to look a different way, another way, upwards, heavenwards, to the place where Jesus sits and reigns above. You have to look to Jesus and His sovereign mercy. Then you will not sink. Then you will not faint. “Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.”

But never forget one thing. When you are ready to faint, ready to sink, the Lord Jesus knows, the Lord Jesus sympathises, the Lord Jesus understands. Other people may not, but He does.

So it was with poor Elijah. He sank down under the juniper tree. Everything was going wrong. It was the end of everything. He said, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.” There he was fainting, but he did not. The Lord put that ministry back into his hands, and sent an angel from heaven to strengthen him. First of all the angel fed him with natural food and drink. Often that readiness to faint has natural connections, bodily connections, and the Lord Jesus knows that. He sent Elijah bodily refreshment for his health. Then He caused him to sleep, and then the angel touched him. It was this, and may this be a word to you, those of you who are ready to faint: “Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.” Now that is just what Elijah was feeling. God did not contradict him. He said, “The journey *is* too great for thee. I agree with you. That is right. But there are some blessed resources here that will strengthen you for every step of the journey right to the very end.” Now that is the receiving of mercy, so that we faint not.

“Then let the worldling boast his joys,
We’ve meat to eat he knows not of;
We count his treasures worthless toys,
While we possess a Saviour’s love.”