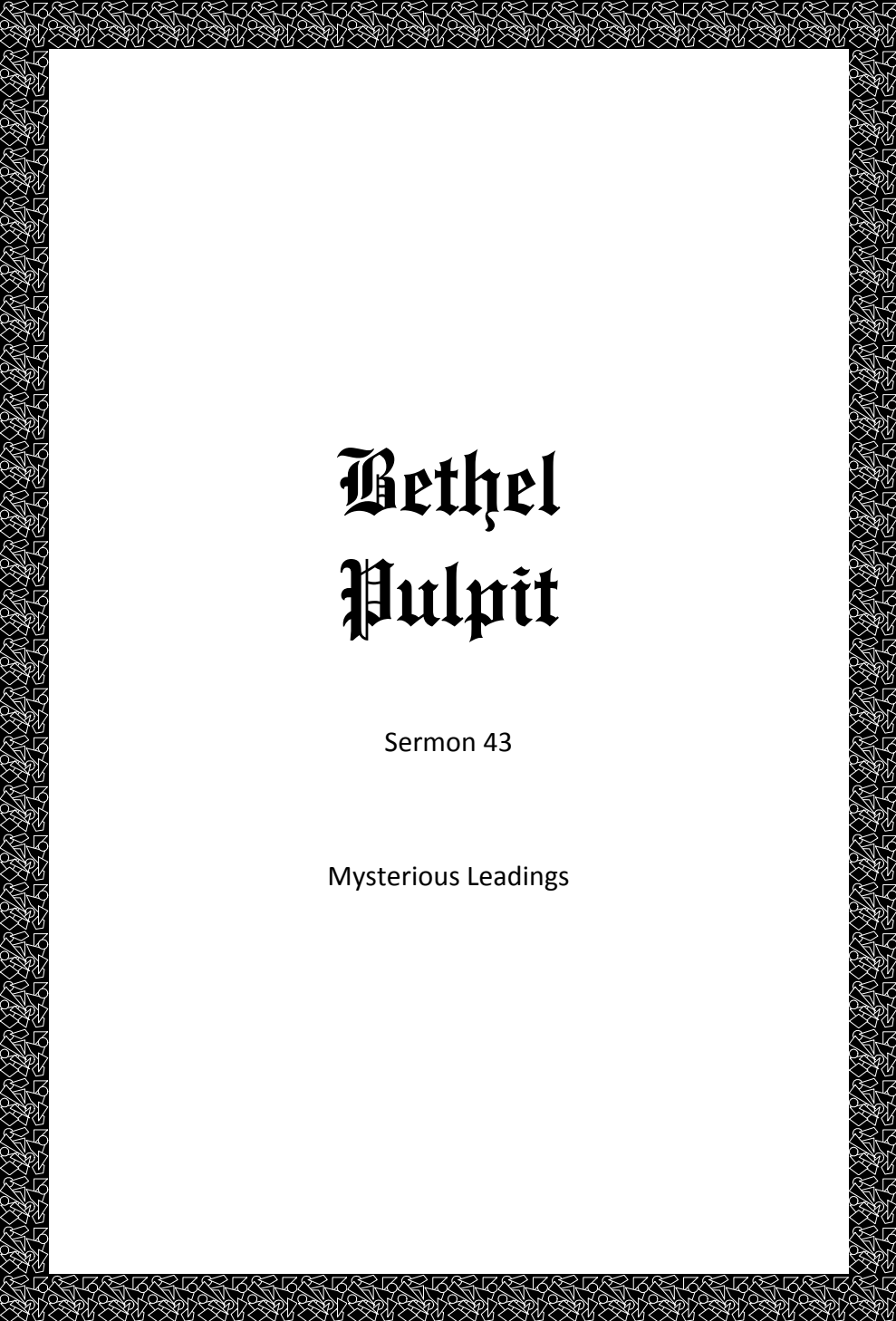




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 43

Mysterious Leadings

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 3rd March, 1988**

Text: *“But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness”
(Exodus 13. 18).*

This was a chosen people, a redeemed people, a people brought out of Egypt. And beloved friends, if you read carefully, Paul writing in his first Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 10 makes it very clear there that God’s people coming out of Egypt into the wilderness, journeying to Canaan, are a typical people, that all these things were given for “our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” How does God deal with His people? How does He care for them? How does He watch over them? How does He lead them? So as we read these interesting accounts in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, we are not just to think of them as past history or the story of Israel. The point is that this is how God in all ages deals with His people. And do you know what the conclusion of it is when you get right to the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses’ own conclusion? “Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord?”

Now beloved friends, God has a people, a people whom He has chosen. Like Israel in Egypt, they are all redeemed by precious blood. They do not all feel persuaded of their interest in it, but they all make it their only hope. They can all say, “Thou art all my help and trust,” every one of them. If you read through Israel coming out of Egypt and then you read 1 Peter 1, you will find a very close correspondence. He starts with the blood, and then the bringing out, the separation: “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” So Israel in Egypt, the Lord’s chosen people, the Lord’s redeemed people, redeemed with the blood of the Lamb. Peter goes on to say in that first chapter, “Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” A chosen people, a redeemed people, and so an eternally favoured people, an eternally blessed people.

“Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord.” Now do I hear someone say, “O that I were one of them!” and, “How may I know that I belong to them?” Well, the point is this: the Lord did not leave them in Egypt. He brought them out. They were chosen, they were redeemed, but they were not left in the land of Egypt. We are told that the Lord brought them out “with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm.” Pharaoh, if he could, would have kept some of them. He would have kept them all. But when he knew he could not keep them all he said, “Only let me keep the children,” and then, “Only let me keep the cattle.” “There shall not an hoof be left behind.” (You older ones remember how those old preachers used to quote that text, “There shall not an hoof be left behind.”)

So the whole of the Lord’s chosen, the whole of His redeemed, were brought right out of Egypt that He might at last bring them to Canaan, to the promised land. If you and I belong to this people, we shall be brought out of the Egypt of this world. Have you noticed how often Egypt is spoken of as being a type of the world? What do you make of that mysterious Scripture in the Book of the Revelation where it says, “Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified” (Revelation 11. 8)? You say, “He was crucified in Jerusalem.” The Revelation says, “Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.” What does it mean? Well, Egypt is the world and it was the world that crucified the Lord Jesus, and it is the world that would still crucify Him. We give no evidence of belonging to the Lord’s dear people if we are left down in the land of Egypt, if we are still satisfied with the onions and the leeks and the garlic of Egypt, the world and all its pleasures. There is a beautiful scripture: “He brought us out from thence, that He might bring us in, to give us the land.” All of them. So if He is going to bring you into heaven at last, then He will begin by bringing you out of Egypt.

You see, they had to journey towards Canaan. They became pilgrims. When they kept the passover, it was with their loins girded, with their staffs in their hands, because they were about to set out on pilgrimage. And all God’s people, His chosen, His redeemed, as the Holy Ghost powerfully brings them out of the land of Egypt, all of them are made pilgrims and with one voice they have to give assent to it:

“What is this world to me?
This world is not my home.”

The Word of God always speaks of redemption in two ways: redemption by price and redemption by power. There are two sides to it. Redemption, what does it mean? To set free by paying a price. So there is a price paid, but then there is a setting free. Redemption by price, redemption by power. The blood of the Lamb was the price in Egypt, but then there was the power in bringing them out that Pharaoh could not stand before. So it is with all the Lord's chosen, all His redeemed. They are redeemed by blood and then they are redeemed by power. They are brought right out of Egypt and they all “declare plainly that they seek a country.” The language of them all is this: “Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.”

The point, the vital point, in the words I have read to you this evening is this, that they are a divinely-led people, a graciously-led people. The Lord did not deliver them out of Pharaoh's hand, bring them right out of Egypt, promise them Canaan, and then leave them to get there as well as they could. He led them every step of the way. So the teaching here is concerning divine leading.

So we read of the fiery, cloudy pillar that led them. It was the same pillar up in the sky. In the day-time it had the appearance of a cloud and at night-time it had the appearance of fire. That in itself is not something specially unusual. No doubt some of you have witnessed it at times. There might be some kind of fire you can see near your home. During the day-time it just looks like a cloud of smoke, but when night comes you can see all the sparks like a cloud of fire. Exactly when the cloudy, fiery pillar began to lead Israel we are not told, and it does not really matter, but we know that it was at the beginning of their pilgrimage on the way to Canaan.

Now if you and I are among the people of God, we shall be divinely led. “As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.” You have an equation there: “as many” on the one side, “the sons of God,” on the other side, led by the Spirit of God. I heard a minister preach once on that text, “As many as are led by the Spirit of God.” If I remember right he had three points - led out, led along, and led in.

Of course today it is not with our mortal eyes. There is not some pillar of cloud and fire going before us. But one thing is very clear. If the Lord in love and mercy and faithfulness led His national people so remarkably, do you think He is going to fail to lead His spiritual people to the promised land? It is not with our mortal eyes, it is not by a visible sign, but it is that clear leading, Christ Himself going before.

“The way I walk cannot be wrong,
If Jesus be but there.”

Keep your eyes on Him, following Him. There is the double leading of the Word of God and the Spirit of God, and they will never contradict one another. Do not say the Lord is leading you to do this if it is forbidden by the Word of God. Do not say the Lord is leading you not to walk in this way if it is commanded in the Word of God.

“As many as are led” - divinely led, graciously led - “by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.” Now that leading will be out of the world. It will be out of a state of unconcern. It will be out of nature’s darkness and death. It will be to the mercy seat in prayer. It will be to the feet of Jesus in humble dependence, with mercy your only plea. “As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.” So the Lord will lead you in prayer. He will lead you in meditation in His Word. He will lead you in your thoughts and affections. He will lead you in your desires. So Israel was constantly a dependent people. They were completely, entirely dependent on the Lord. They were dependent on Him for every drop of water they drank and every particle of food they ate. This great multitude, they were completely dependent.

On this point of divine leading, they were not to have any will of their own. If the pillar of cloud moved the whole camp of Israel had to rise up. They had not to go before it. Beware of going before God. Some people start with a plan, an ambition, and when they are halfway they beg that the Lord will go with them. Do not move until the pillar of cloud moves. But when it did, they were not allowed to tarry, they must move. It may be in the middle of the night when they were asleep, but when the pillar of fire moved, they had to move. It is made clear that sometimes the pillar of cloud stood without moving for months at a time. Why? Because God was leading them according to His purpose. They

may have become weary, but woe betide them if they went before the pillar of cloud. As long as they did not move, they were beneath its shadow, beneath its protection.

There is a remarkable verse about the fiery, cloud pillar in one of the short chapters in Isaiah which specially emphasises the point of protection. “There shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain.” You see the shelter and the protection. “The Lord will create upon every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night: for upon all the glory shall be a defence.”

They were not to have any will of their own in this matter of leading. God was completely sovereign. Sometimes it must have been irksome to them because it is clear that in some places they had just settled down and unpacked and pitched their tents and the pillar of cloud and fire was on its way again. But they must not linger, they must not tarry. God gives no account of His matters. It was this journeying on, in a gospel sense looking only unto Jesus, depending only on Him, hanging only upon Him. And they were safe as long as He was with them. If the pillar of cloud and fire led them, there they drank of water from the smitten rock and they were satisfied. Wherever it led them, the manna fell and it did not fall in any single place except beneath the shadow of the pillar of cloud and fire. If it led them to fierce enemies, it was only that they might be overthrown.

The Lord still leads His people. He is their defence. But He will have them completely dependent on Him, following only after Him, continually pressing on towards the mark, leaving Egypt further and further behind, going on towards Canaan. The Lord said to them when they left Egypt, “Ye shall pass this way heretofore no more.” It was a promise, but it was also a commandment. They had not to be thinking of looking back, thinking of going back.

Now the way God led them was a very strange and very mysterious way. It was so right at the beginning, and so it ever has been with God’s Israel. And if you belong to them, if you are divinely led, you will not be able to understand the way that the Lord leads you. Sometimes His dealings will be very strange. Sometimes they will be very mysterious.

But faith always believes this, that the way God leads is right. He has never made a mistake, He never will. In the one hundred and seventh psalm, “He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.” If you read in the ensuing verses, what a peculiar way it was, how perplexing, how hard, how difficult! But it was a right way and it led to the city of habitation. God’s way will be mysterious with you and at times it will be disappointing, at times it will be rough, but it will always be right.

“’Tis the right way, though dark and rough;
Mysterious, yet ’tis plain enough;
And we, when faith is changed to sight,
Shall know the ways of God were right.”

“He led them forth by the right way.” It was not a way they would have chosen. It was not an easy way. But “He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.”

Now here we have the very beginning of His leading, and the first way in which He led Israel, well it all seemed completely wrong. If you look at the map and the place Rameses where we are told the Israelites gathered before setting out for Canaan, there was a very easy, well-marked-out way, a proper road, the way of the Philistines. It was so simple, a simple, straight line. They would not go through any wilderness, would not touch the Red Sea. It would have taken them four or five days and they would have reached the land of Canaan. No doubt that is what they expected, at least, most of them. When the Lord began leading them, instead of sending them the straightforward way, He seemed to send them completely in the wrong direction. Instead of sending them straight across eastward, He sent them south. They seemed to be going right out of the way. “He led them forth by the right way.” Now the Lord does not always give an explanation of His dealings, but He does here. It is made very clear why the Lord led them in this strange way. “It came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines” (verse 17). He led them, but He did not lead them the way they expected. He did not lead them the easiest way. He did not lead them the most straightforward way.

He “led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines.” Now of course there are many reasons why God did not just lead His

people to Canaan in four or five days. Some of the reasons are obvious. They had to go to Sinai to be given the ten commandments, the moral law, the ceremonial law. They had to be moulded together into a people. They had to be tried. They had to be tested. They had to live a life of dependence. They had to prove the Lord's omnipotence performing miracles for them. They had to prove the Lord's faithfulness. They had to prove His love. They had to prove that although He chastened, He never forsook them. They had to prove it and so will you and I. The old preachers used to say, "You are not to walk to heaven in carpet slippers. It will not be a pathway of roses. It will be shoes of iron and brass you need." So the Lord is not going to take us a short cut to heaven. He is going to lead us through the wilderness, and you will prove this world to be a waste howling wilderness and if you and I do not feel it to be a waste howling wilderness, then we are not amongst these pilgrims on the way to Canaan.

But here right at the beginning: "It came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt." There was this short cut, this simple way, so easy, so plain, the road marked out. But God could see that there were cruel Philistines waiting for them. God could see that there were enemies waiting for them who were too strong for them, who would destroy them. So God did not tell the Israelites why, but later He revealed it to Moses when he wrote the Book of Exodus. But in much love and mercy He sent them this way round so that they could escape those cruel Philistines who were waiting to slay them.

Sometimes you will have strange things in your life. Why did the Lord not let me go that way? It all seemed right? It all seemed plain and straightforward? Well, the Lord could see what you could not see. There was a cruel Philistine waiting to slay you and another cruel Philistine to tempt you and another cruel Philistine to trip you up. The Lord sees what there is tomorrow and in the unknown way, which you cannot see.

You remember the great Augustine, how he records he always walked home the same way, and one day, to his annoyance, he lost his way and went a long way round. Why did God allow this? He found afterwards that there were two assassins, knowing that he always went this

way, waiting to kill him. The Lord knew. John Newton the hymnwriter gloried in his punctuality, but just once, when he was harbour master at Liverpool, he was late. He saw the ship he should have been on pulling away from the shore, and he was angry. About a mile out of Liverpool, the ship he should have been on capsized, and all the lives were lost.

So it may be tonight some of you cannot understand the things that are happening to you. You cannot understand why the Lord closed that way, why the Lord said, “Not this path,” why the Lord disappointed you here, why the Lord said, “I will overturn, overturn, overturn it, and it shall be no more.” You know what it usually is. “God always gives the best to those who leave the choice to Him” – tried and proved! And usually when He disappoints it is this: “God having provided some better thing for us.” But why this illness, why this affliction, why this sorrow, why this bereavement, why this trouble, why is everything going wrong, why is everything being overturned? You can see it five days’ journey away, what you want, your ambition. But the Lord does not lead you that way, though it is near, though to you, to anyone else, to common sense, it seems the right way. The Lord knows what the right way is. Do not rebel against the Lord’s leading. “Thy way is in the sea, and Thy path in the great waters, and Thy footsteps are not known.” You will live to prove this: “‘Tis all for the best.” He never made a mistake, and He never will.

“And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt: *But God led the people about.*” That “*but God*” is in contrast to God leading them this easy way, this short way, this simple way. “*But God led the people about.*” That means at times they seemed to be going round in circles. At times they seemed to be going in the wrong direction. It means at times they were going backwards instead of forwards. Now God led His people about. He led them and He led them by the right way, but He led them about. And we are reminded of that Wwrd in Moses’ song right at the end of the forty years. He said of God, “He found him” - that is, God found Jacob, not Jacob found God. “He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness.” Now listen: “He led him about” - the very same word we have here: “He led him about, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye.”

Now there is a three-fold application of this word: “He found him.” First of all, the man Jacob, Isaac’s son; secondly, Jacob’s spiritual seed, the Israel of God, who bear his name; thirdly, God’s people in all ages. “He led him about.” Now wasn’t old Jacob led about? Did any of the Old Testament saints have as many ups and downs, as many ins and outs as old Jacob did? The trials he had, everything seeming to go wrong, being deceived by his children, losing his beloved Joseph. “Ye shall bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.” O the Lord’s peculiar dealings with Jacob! “He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; He led him about.” Well, He did lead him about. But it was a right way, and when you come to Genesis 48 and Genesis 49, here is the old patriarch: he had not a single cloud in his sky. He could look back. He is on his dying bed and he has only one thing to do: to gather his feet up into his bed and die. “He led him about.” When God first met with Jacob, He said this to him: “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest.” All places. And there were some strange places, weren’t there? “In all places that I have spoken to thee of.” “He led him *about*,” with the emphasis on the *about*. “He instructed him.” And didn’t Jacob learn some lessons! “He kept him as the apple of His eye.”

“All that His heavenly Father gave,
His hands securely keep.”

So first Jacob, then Jacob’s seed, the Israel of God here, and then all His people, every sinner saved by grace. Has He found you? “He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness.” Then He will lead you about. And the emphasis with you sometimes will be the *about*, and your unbelief will see nothing but the *about*. “He instructed him.” There are none taught like those whom God teaches. “He instructed Him.” But He will keep you as the apple of His eye. However round about it is, you cannot perish.

“But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea,” and then to the Red Sea. Perhaps some of you know this “Red Sea place” in your life. It is part of the Lord leading you about. It is part of the Lord instructing you. They were completely hemmed in. They had the Egyptians pursuing them behind, Pharaoh and his great army seeking to slay them all. Here they were, this helpless multitude and

mountains on either side, and in front the water of the Red Sea - no way of escape, no way of deliverance. "When thou canst no deliverance see." And it was the pillar of cloud and fire that had led them there. Had God made a mistake? Had God led them there that He might forsake them, that they might perish? It was all part of the Lord leading them about.

"But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea." You cannot understand your way tonight. You are hemmed in on every side, things in providence and things in grace. You wonder what the end will be. You fear you will be destroyed, that you will sink beneath it. There was only one way they could look, and that was upward, because if they looked forward or backward or on either side, it was certain death and destruction. If you are at the Red Sea tonight, God has led you there, not that you might be destroyed, but that you might "stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord." The Red Sea was a wonderful place. Israel never forgot it. Right through the prophets and minor prophets, when Israel was in trouble they were reminded of the Red Sea. It was a complete deliverance. God divided the water for them, but not only that, God delivered them from the Egyptians for ever. They had many troubles in the wilderness, but they never saw an Egyptian again. "The Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever."

It is all for the best. God makes no mistakes. It is a right way, but He will lead you about. It will trouble you when all seems wrong, all seems perverse, all seems contradictory. But it is the right way. Every enemy shall be destroyed. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." Then the Lord will make that way. "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will shew to you to day; for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace." "He led him about, He instructed Him, He kept him as the apple of His eye." You are not going to perish in it.

"He'll lead them on fair Zion's road,
Though weary, weak, and faint;
For O! they ne'er shall lose their God,
Or God e'er lose a saint."

“He led him about, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye.” “But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness.”