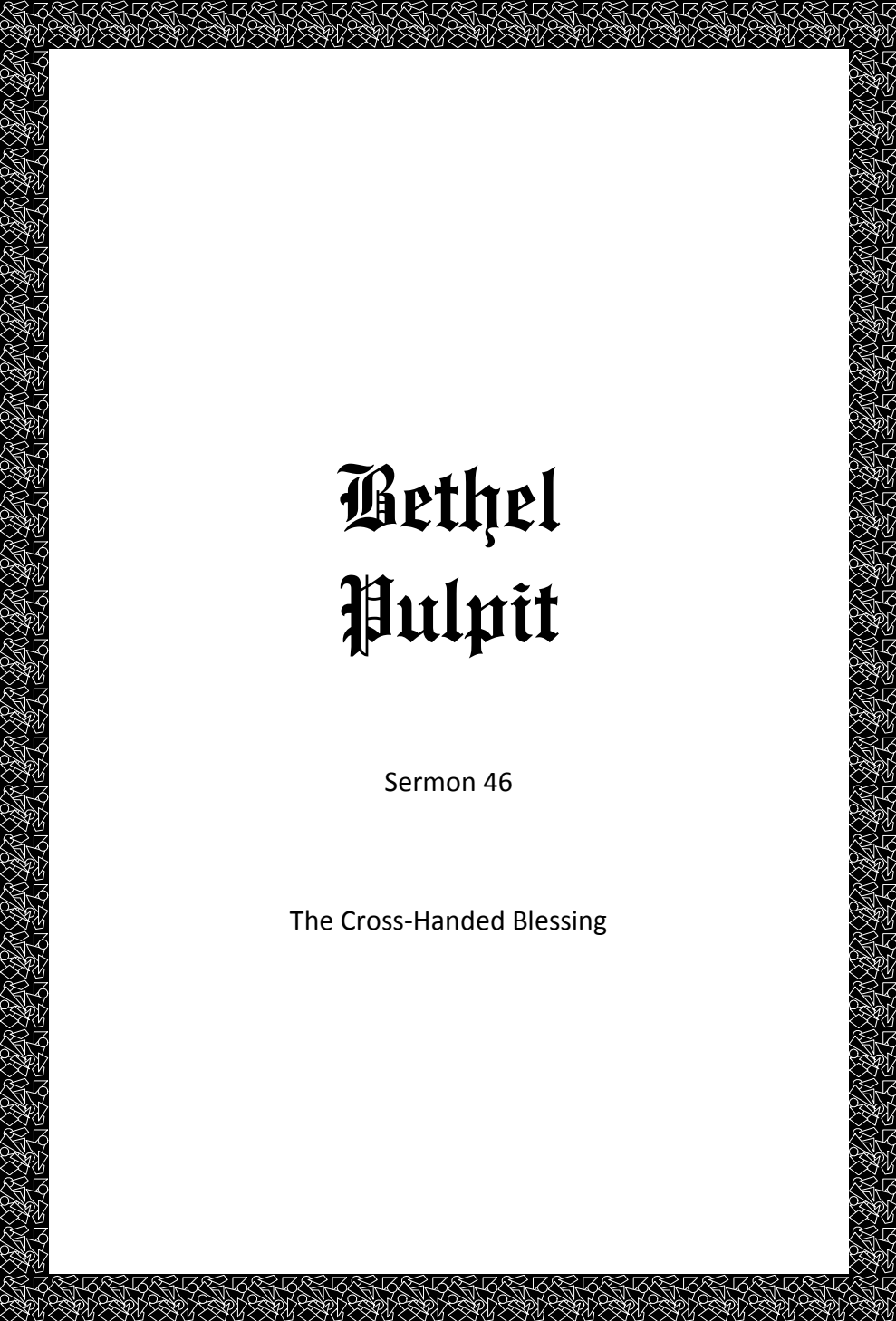




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 46

The Cross-Handed Blessing

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 23rd February, 1989**

Text: *“And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him: and he held up his father’s hand, to remove it from Ephraim’s head unto Manasseh’s head. And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father: for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head. And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it” (Genesis 48. 17 - 19).*

We have a very old man here, Jacob, on the verge of eternity, on the verge of heaven. And how blessed were Jacob’s last days! He had had a mixed life. He had known many sorrows, much of the chastening of God. There had been many sins, many faults with him. But in his last days there seems to be not a single cloud in his sky. O what a wonderful thing it is: “The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.” We do not see it much today. We often hear that prayer, “Let their last days be their best days,” but with most people, their last days are not their best days. Why, it is difficult to say. But in past generations there were so many people who came down to the grave like a shock of corn fully ripe. But today it does not really seem that with most people their last days are their best days. But it was so with Jacob. Have you noticed that sometimes he is called Jacob, and sometimes Israel, and sometimes you get Jacob and Israel in the same sentence, in the same verse? I think you will usually find that when the flesh is prevailing, he is called Jacob, and when the spirit is prevailing, he is called Israel, and it is almost entirely Israel in this chapter.

Here was an aged man on the verge of eternity, and he looks back. At this time he was not only aged, but he was unwell. His beloved son Joseph visits him, bringing his two children, Manasseh and Ephraim with him, and it seems that Jacob just began to muse on the years that are past. You do not read of any greeting. You do not read of any human salutation. You do not read of any earthly enquiry. You read, “God almighty appeared unto me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me.” He goes right back to his spiritual beginnings.

“Dost mind the place, the spot of ground,
Where Jesus did thee meet?”

Are there ever times when you can go back right to your beginnings, to the place where God first met with you, and can you say, “He blessed me there”? As he muses, some of his trials come before him, especially that very great sorrow. Yet there does not seem any particular point or reason why he should mention it. But it comes in. “As for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Canaan in the way, when yet there was but a little way to come unto Ephrath: and I buried her there.” There is the remembrance of the many sorrows through which he has been brought.

And then you find some of the wonderful language that he speaks by way of testimony. He says, “God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day.” He bears witness to the faithfulness of God, the faithfulness of God despite his own unfaithfulness. When he says, “which fed me all my life long,” he means that God had been a Shepherd to him (being an eastern country and Jacob having been a shepherd). The margin gives it, “God which shepherded me all my life long.” It is a wonderful thing if you can look back and trace the faithfulness of God, despite all your sins and shortcomings and failures, despite all the wanderings of your heart, that God has fed you to this day, has shepherded you to this day. You can say,

“‘Twas grace that kept me to this day,
And will not let me go.”

“God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day.” He has looked back to Bethel, to Luz. He has remembered the precious promises. Now he bears witness that not one good thing had failed of all that God had promised. He bears witness to the faithfulness of God.

“The Angel” – with a capital A – “the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads.” Joseph was not in any doubt as to whom this Angel was. It was not a created angel. It was the Son of God, the Angel of the covenant. Joseph must often have heard from his father of that Angel who wrestled with him to the break of day, and Jacob said, “I will not let thee go, except Thou bless me.” “And He blessed him there.” It

was redemption. These old patriarchs had a good religion. They had not any Bible to read, any preacher to listen to, any chapel to attend, but they had a good religion. They got it all direct from God. Jacob knew the wonders of redemption. “The Angel which redeemed me from all evil.” Now how many of you can look back and speak of the wonders of redemption?

“E’er since, by faith, I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.”

The wonders of redemption, despite all your sin and your unworthiness and your guilt. The wonders of redemption!

“The Angel which redeemed me from all evil.” And then of course Jacob uses it in the sense of deliverance. Remember how he said to Pharaoh, “Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been.” There were many evils that he knew in various ways. But now he can look back, like Paul did. Paul spoke of all these various trials, but then he looked back: “But out of them all the Lord delivered me.” And old Jacob looks back and he says, “The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads.”

So first of all we have old Jacob, this dear, godly patriarch on the borders of the land, on the verge of eternity. And then we have Joseph. He too could look back and see the mysterious dealings of God, the way the Lord had led him; so strange, but now he sees it all plain enough. As he said to his brethren, “Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good.” He could trace that God had not made any mistakes.

“’Tis the right way, though hard and rough,
Mysterious, yet ’tis plain enough;
And when our faith is turned to sight,
We’ll know the ways of God were right.”

Now Joseph did not always know it. O what a life he had had – a mysterious life, snatched away from his loved father, cruelly treated by his brethren, thrown into the pit, sold to the Midianites, tempted by Potiphar’s wife, falsely accused by her, thrown into prison, forgotten, and then exalted next to the throne. We have that word in Stephen’s speech, Acts

7: “The patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him.” He did not always feel that God was with him. He did not always know that God was with him. “But God was with him.” That did not mean he was free from trouble: he had much trouble. But God was with him and God made every trouble, every sorrow, work together for his real good and the good of all his people.

Joseph too can look back and he can trace the mysterious sovereignty of God. But it was not always that he could see it. “Until the time that his word came: the Word of the Lord tried him.” It will try you. We are told that the iron entered into his very soul. Now he looks back and he sees that all was right – brought safely through, re-united with his dear father, reconciled to his brethren – the end of the thing is better than the beginning. O beloved friends, with you it is not the end yet. You will prove the end of the thing is better than the beginning. You may have to wait, and you may have to wait long, but you will prove that the end of the thing is better than the beginning.

“Yes, dearest Lord, ’tis my desire
Thy wise appointments to admire;
And trace the footsteps of my God,
Through every path in Zion’s road.”

One thing we notice with Joseph: he had been wonderfully exalted, but we still see that humility with him. We find Joseph bowing down before Jacob with his face to the earth. This is grace. There are so many people and when they get on in the world, they despise their parents. I remember in my little native town how marked this was; it was a talking point in the town. One was the vicar. They said if he met his aged father, he did not talk to him, did not acknowledge him. I saw it with my own eyes. The poor, aged man turned round and sadly stared after his son, a professed minister. And the other was the chief inspector on the local buses, and his little old father was a dear old man. He always used to wear a pair of clogs. But when his son met him, he would not speak to him. It is not often it goes as far as that, but in spirit there are so many people who when they were low down, when they were in trouble, when they were struggling, they were so humble, but when they were exalted, they seemed to forget former days. Now Joseph did not. You see the

way in which this great man – he was almost like the prime minister – bowed himself before old Jacob with his face to the earth. That is grace.

And Joseph was concerned about his family. Perhaps you are concerned about your family. What he wanted was for God to bless them. There is something here we do not have today. The old patriarchs seemed to have a right to bestow a blessing, and the reason Joseph brought Manasseh and Ephraim with him was because he wanted old Jacob to bless them. Now of course we cannot do that today. We cannot take our children to any man, any minister, and ask him to bless them. But we can pray God for the blessing, and we can ask our friends to pray God for the blessing. These two boys, Manasseh and Ephraim, must have had everything. They must have been almost like princes. The wealth of Egypt was at their feet. But Joseph wanted the blessing of God to rest upon them. Nothing less would do. So he seeks this from his aged father, that he would bestow the blessing upon them.

We can be mistaken in reading this chapter. Manasseh and Ephraim were both grown up at this time. Both of them must have been at least over twenty years of age. We have it clearly that they were born to Joseph before Jacob came down into Egypt, and he had been in Egypt a long time. When we read that Joseph brought them out from between his knees, we tend to think of them as little children. What exactly the meaning of that is, it is difficult to say. The old commentators seem to think the two boys had fallen down on the floor in reverence and there they were kneeling down between old Jacob's knees, and Joseph lifted them up from between Jacob's knees. Be that as it may, they were grown young men, but Joseph was still concerned about them. He still prayed for them. He still wanted the blessing for them. He did not want them to be satisfied with all that Egypt could give. He wanted them to choose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."

So first of all we have old Jacob, and then we have Joseph, and then we have the two grandchildren, Manasseh the elder, Ephraim the younger. And then we come to these verses. When Jacob blessed his two grandchildren, he crossed his hands. He gave them a cross-handed blessing. It was not exactly what Joseph expected or what the boys expected. In one sense, it was the opposite, but still it was a blessing and

it was according to God's will. You have got the picture clearly in your mind, haven't you? Manasseh was the elder, so Joseph put him in front of Jacob's right hand so that he could put his right hand, the hand of priority, pre-eminence, on his head. And Ephraim, who was the younger, he brought him and put him in front of old Jacob's left hand. Jacob blessed them as he was requested, but in blessing them he crossed his hands over and put his right hand on the head of Ephraim, the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, the elder.

This cross-handed blessing. Now God still blesses His people, all of them. He has blessed them "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." He has promised to bless them in grace and to bless them in providence. He will bless them in answer to their prayers. But sometimes God's blessings come in a different way from the way in which we expect them. Sometimes it may be just the opposite. But there will be times in your life when you have to look back and you have to bless God that He answered your prayers the very opposite of what you prayed for. I wonder if any of you here tonight have got a cross-handed blessing like that. Didn't you wrestle, didn't you pray that this thing would not come to pass? You felt you could not bear it, you could not go through with it, but the time came when the thing you feared came upon you. But tonight you look back and you bless God for it. You see that it was right, though you did not at the time. And that time when the Lord disappointed you. O it was such a disappointment. You felt you could hardly bear it. And yet tonight you have lived to prove that it was a cross-handed blessing, that disappointments are His appointments. He does not make any mistakes.

"Disappointment, His appointment,
Change one letter, then I see
That the thwarting of my purpose
Is God's better plan for me."

The cross-handed blessing. You see, sometimes in a disappointment, in a sorrow, in a cross-handed blessing, you are led into fellowship with Christ in His sufferings. In your sorrow, you think of His sorrow and you are brought here:

"How bitter that cup, no heart can conceive,
Which He drank quite up that sinners might live!"

His way was much rougher and darker than mine;
Did Christ, my Lord, suffer, and shall I repine?"

"And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near unto him." Now of course the old man could not see. "And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it upon Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh's head, guiding his hands wittingly" – that is, he did it deliberately. The margin has it something like this: "making his hands wise." "Guiding his hands wittingly; for Manasseh was the firstborn." O these cross-handed blessings! You seek the Lord's favour, and He seems to cut across it. You ask for His blessing for yourself, and things are not what you expect. You pray for your children, and sorrows, trials, disappointments come.

"And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him." Tell me, beloved friends, do the Lord's mysterious dealings with you ever displease you, as you are made honest before God? You know what William Gadsby sings in the well-known, new year hymn:

"God's righteous ways our carnal hearts despise,
And often say they're neither just nor wise."

Now we are not usually left to say it, but in our hearts we are displeased. Things seem to be going well, in your business, and then something goes wrong. The Lord stops you in your way, and when you see it, it displeases you. None of us likes to be crossed. None of us likes trouble. None of us likes sorrow. It displeases us. Perhaps your health has been good, and then suddenly something has come, O and it displeased you. Perhaps you have something in your family and it grieves you sore and it displeases you. Or it may be things in your life, your circumstances, your religion, with other people, things in the church of God.

"When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him." Not only so, he tried to stop it. "And he held up his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head unto Manasseh's head." You and I, if we could, would stay the hand of God, or we would change the hand of God, or we would alter the hand of God. Now beloved friends, we never shall, we never can, because His hand is

almighty. “He is in one mind, and who can turn Him? and what His soul desireth, even that He doeth.” How often have I thought of that in the Book of Joshua (17. 14 - 18). It first came to me spiritually years ago in solemn circumstances, how the children of Joseph had a lot appointed for them, a piece of ground allotted to them by Joshua according to God’s design, and they were dissatisfied with their lot. Now dear child of God, are you ever dissatisfied with your lot? And they came to Joshua and they wanted another lot, a different lot, a better lot. Joshua did not give it. He refused to give it. He could not give it. God had appointed this lot. But if you read through chapter 17, the Lord so helped them in it, so blessed them in it, so sanctified it to them, that the lot appointed for them which seemed to be such a curse became an abundant blessing. The Lord will not change your lot, but He will sanctify it to you and bless it to you.

“Would they another lot prefer?

Rejected be the thought!”

“Thou givest me the lot

Of those that fear Thy name;

If endless life be their reward,

I shall possess the same.”

“And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him: and he held up his father’s hand, to remove it from Ephraim’s head unto Manasseh’s head.” It is a solemn thing, isn’t it, that sometimes we think we know better than God what is right? “And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father.” And our hearts say that. We say, “Not so, my father.” Really, in his heart of hearts Joseph thought his father had made a mistake. He thought old Jacob could not see very well. He thought he had made a mistake. God never makes a mistake. He never has, He never will. And yet sometimes we act and behave and think as if He has. “And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father.”

Joseph could give very good reasons for his case, and so do you and I. “For this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head. And his father refused.” Sometimes God will refuse you. It may be you ask for something and God refuses and you live to prove the love and mercy in it. O what a solemn word is that, “He gave them their request” – in other words, He did not refuse them – “*But* sent leanness into their soul”! It is a

solemn thing if a child of God wants carnal things, worldly things, and God does not refuse him. “Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things.” It is a solemn thing if God never refuses us. Does the Lord ever refuse you? It is a solemn thing if you are seeking your ambitions and your money and your prosperity and all these other things and God never refuses you.

“And his father refused.” Really at this time he was very clearly anointed and led by the Spirit of God. “And his father refused.” Now Jacob would have done anything for Joseph. If ever a father loved his son, Jacob loved Joseph and how much more so after he had give him up for dead all those years and now he had received him back from the grave! “And his father refused.”

“‘Tis if need be, He reproves us,
Lest we settle on our lees

That is it. “His father refused him.”

“To His church, His joy and treasure,
Every trial works for good;
They are dealt in weight and measure,
Yet how little understood!

Now this is it:

“Not in anger,
But from His dear covenant love.”

You have not seen the end of it yet, and the end of a thing is better than the beginning.

“And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it.” What did old Jacob mean? Well really, simply he meant this. Joseph, I have not made a mistake. I know what I am doing, and it is right, and it is for the Lord’s honour and glory. It is according to His will and purpose. It is for your good, and it is for the good of these boys. It is not a mistake. I am not deceived, Joseph. “I know it, my son, I know it.” And that is the way God speaks to His dear children. Joseph said to his father, “Not so, my father.” “And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it.”

First of all, then, God always knows what He is doing, and what He does is always for the best. God never makes any mistake. “I know it, my son, I know it.” Whatever God does, it shall be for ever. It is for the honour and glory of His name. It is for His people’s real good. His way seems mysterious, but it is not mysterious to Him. His hands are crossed, but there is a blessing in it. It is cross-handed, but it is a cross-handed blessing. We have that word: “He Himself knew what He would do.” He always does. And He never made a mistake, He never will.

“I know it, my son, I know it.” God does know what He does. “He knoweth the way that I take.” And also He knows the way He taketh. “There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture’s eye hath not seen.” But “the redeemed shall walk there.” The Lord knows it from end to end, and it is paved with love.

“I know it, my son, I know it.” The Lord knows that He is acting in infinite wisdom. “‘Tis all for the best.” The Lord knows that He is acting in such tenderness, He is acting in such love. There are so many things that a tiny child does not understand. When that tiny child is taken to the doctor, and perhaps the doctor takes a needle and jabs it into him, doesn’t that tiny child think the doctor is cruel, and that his mother is cruel? But “I know it, my son, I know it.” And the Lord knows this: that if it is in infinite wisdom, and if it is in eternal love, the Lord knows that it is working together for your real, lasting, eternal good.

And sometimes *you* will know it. “We know,” says Paul, “that all things work together for good.” We do not always feel it, and there are many, many times when we cannot see it, because God’s hands are crossed. Yet when in our right mind, we *know* that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”

“His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.”

Remember that lady we had in the Bethesda Home a few years ago, Maisie Isaac. She was only in her fifties, and she died of cancer.

You remember the little tale she had to tell, that she gave up chapel and went right out into the world. She had nothing to do with religion at all. Then the Lord smote her down with cancer. Yet she used to speak of the Lord's goodness in laying this cancer upon her. At the funeral, I spoke from those texts, "Before I was afflicted I went astray." And the other one: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted."

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face."

"And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father." "And his father refused and said, I know it, my son, I know it." What if salvation is in it? What if the blessing is in it? What if heaven is in it? You see, Jacob's hands were crossed, but they were crossed in a way of love, not in a way of judgment. They were crossed in a way of blessing. And you see how tenderly he calls his beloved Joseph, "My son," as if he said, "Joseph, you know how dearly I love these children, your children, my grandchildren. And you know I would never, never, never do anything that would really harm them. Joseph, there is a blessing in it. Trust me in it. Leave it all to me." "I know it, my son, I know it." If the Lord calls you His child, calls you His son, gives you the sweet assurance that He is your loving Father in Christ, then "your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things." These are His mysterious appointments from all eternity, to bring you to glory, to command the blessing, to glorify His name – and yet so cross-handed!

"And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father." "And his father refused, and said I know it, my son, I know it."