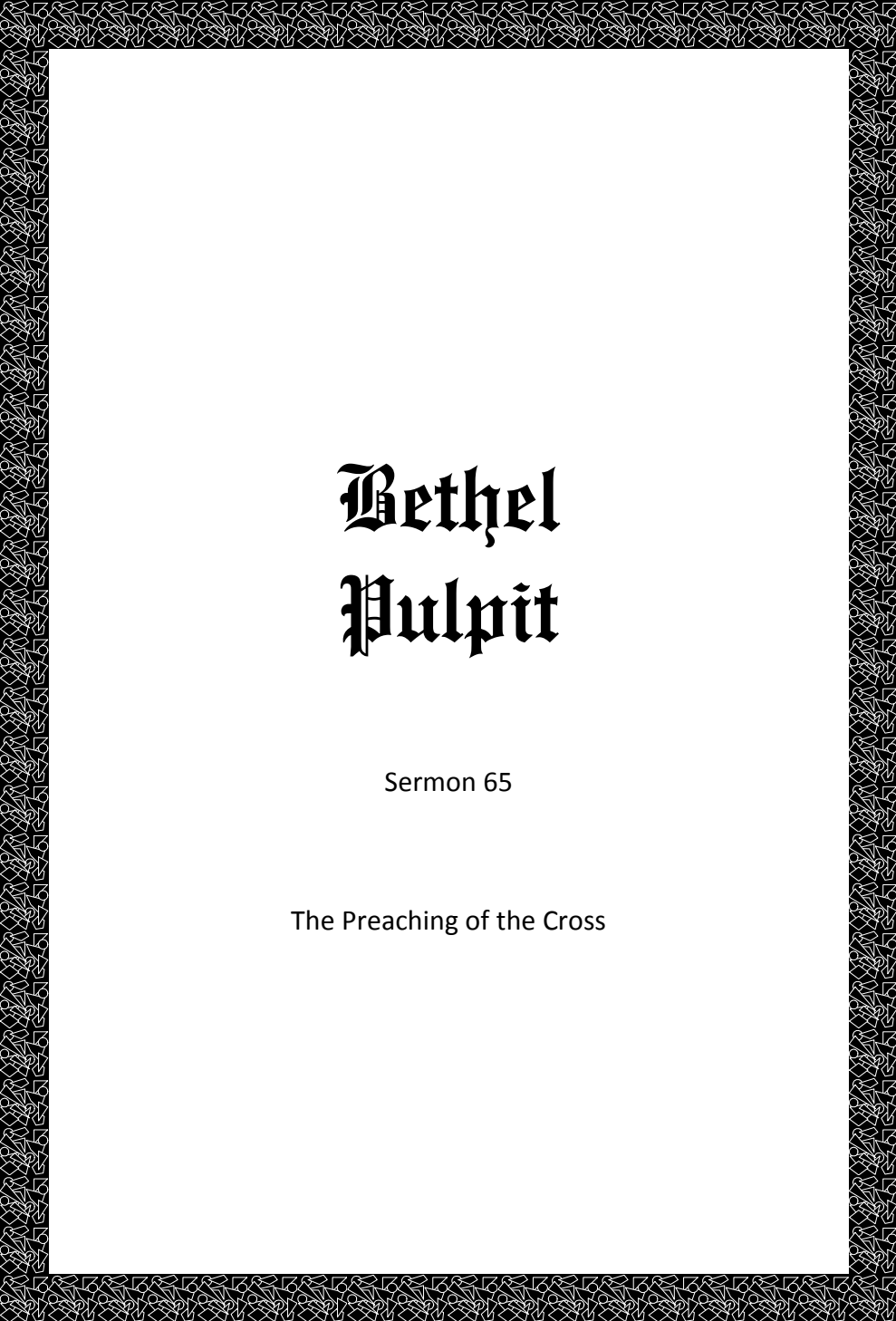




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 65

The Preaching of the Cross

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 6th January, 1991**

Text: *“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1. 18).*

In the sight of God there are only two kinds of people in the world. They are described here as “them that perish” and “us which are saved.” Now as God looks down from heaven, He sees just that division. It divides the whole human race in two. It divides the professing church in two. It divides each congregation in two. Of course, in the Bible they are described in various ways: the righteous and the wicked, the sheep and the goats, those who will be in heaven and those who will be in hell. There are many ways in which they are described, but here it is simply this: “them that perish” and “us which are saved.”

Now I suppose socially and geographically and economically you can make a thousand divisions in the human race: black and white and yellow, rich and poor, well-known and unknown, religious and irreligious. But God divides the human race into two classes. The whole human race has sinned, fallen in Adam, is guilty, each of us here. Now there are some who are saved: “us which are saved” – saved from the guilt of sin, saved from the power of sin, and at last saved from a lost eternity, saved from sinking into hell. Then there are those others who perish in their sin. They perish for ever in a lost eternity on account of their sin. There is not any middle ground. There is not any neutrality between “them that perish” and “us which are saved.” You cannot have a kind of halfway person. You cannot have a kind of no man's land in between. It is either the one or the other. And the point is, it is so to each of us personally. Either we belong to the one or the other tonight, and in the great day we shall belong either to the one or the other. We shall either hear that voice, Come in ye blessed, or that voice, Depart ye cursed.

Some of us here have been brought to tremble at these things and no doubt to some these things mean nothing at all. They are just the things the preacher is expected to say. I could repeat this until midnight

and it would not have the slightest effect. But if the Holy Ghost touches one heart that person would tremble before it.

“What shall I do, or whither flee,
To escape the vengeance due to me?”

May the Lord solemnise each heart, quicken each soul, cause that vital anxious concern, make it the great question: am I amongst the “*us* who are saved” or among the “*them* that perish”?

When the Lord Jesus hung bleeding, dying on the cross, there were two thieves crucified with Him. They were both sinners. They were both guilty. They both deserved to die. Yet one was found amongst “*us* which are saved” and the other was found amongst “*them* which perish.” There was the dying Saviour in the midst and His cross separated. It separated between the one on the right hand and the other on the left hand. Now as it was on that solemn day when the Lord Jesus died, so it is today. And the separation, the division, is on the same ground: a crucified Saviour. It is not visiting Jerusalem, not looking on an actual cross, but it is the preaching of the cross which makes the division, makes the separation, puts you and me either on the one side or on the other.

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” What then is the preaching of the cross? If it is so important, so vital, if it is a matter of life and death, eternal life or eternal death, what is the preaching of the cross? Well first of all, the preaching of the cross is that there was a Man who once lived upon this earth, a Man who never sinned, neither was guile found in His mouth, the only holy Man, the only Man without sin who ever lived. Yet they took Him outside Jerusalem’s walls and cruelly nailed Him to a cross, and there He bled and died. Now this is the preaching of the cross. The preaching of the cross is that this dear Man who there was nailed to that cross is true almighty God – a real Man, and yet true almighty God. This is the preaching of the cross. The preaching of the cross is that though He died and was buried, the third day He rose triumphant and He ascended into heaven, He is now at God’s right hand, He sits on the throne, He rules over all the world, and at last He will descend from heaven, set up His judgment throne, and judge the living and the dead. This is the preaching of the cross.

The preaching of the cross is that this Man, the Lord Jesus, willingly, freely laid down His life. He said, “No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” The preaching of the cross is that there was a purpose in His death. He came to earth for many reasons, but especially that He might bleed and die on the cross. In the simple words of the children’s hymn:

“There was no other good enough,
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in.”

Again in the words of the children’s hymn:

“He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by His precious blood.”

That is the preaching of the cross.

Now how could it be that a dear Man, even a holy Man, a sinless Man, even if that Man be true almighty God, how could it be that His cross could have such tremendous effects? Well, at Calvary where Jesus died, at Calvary where He was nailed to the cross, mysterious transactions took place. All have sinned and come short of God’s glory. A holy, just, righteous God must punish sin. We have broken His law. The law declares, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” So according to the wonderful purposes of God from eternity in the covenant of grace, the Lord Jesus on the cross took the place of His own people. He took the place of those He was determined to save. There, to use the apostle’s words, He “suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.” The cross was the place that you and I deserved, where you and I should have been. For His people the Lord Jesus became a substitute. A substitute is a person who takes the place of someone else.

“He took the dying traitor’s place,
And suffered in his stead;
For man (O miracle of grace!)
For man the Saviour bled.”

The sins of all His people were taken away from them and they were laid upon His sacred head. As He bore those sins, He bore their punishment. His Father smote Him with the sword of divine justice. Almighty wrath fell upon Him. He bore His people's sins, He bore that terrible suffering, that agony, and then He died. He suffered that His people might never suffer. He bore their hell on the cross that they might enjoy an undeserved heaven. So, you see, this is the preaching of the cross.

There are some wonderful accomplishments of that "wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died." The sins of His people were for ever taken away. A way of forgiveness was for ever opened up, a way whereby the worst of sinners might come to heaven at last. His precious blood was shed that it might be a fountain that washes away sin and guilt. The righteousness of God's holy law was satisfied. In the cross of Christ it had all that it demanded. It can never demand a second payment of the same debt, once at the hands of the suffering Saviour, and then again at the hands of the sinner in whose place He suffered. The debt has been paid. The ransom price has been laid down. Redemption is accomplished. Salvation is procured. The Lord Jesus must shed His precious blood, for "without shedding of blood is no remission." He must die, death being the wages of sin. This is the preaching of the cross.

But as the cross is preached, it is not preaching just a kind of mysterious transaction, a legal transaction. The awful sufferings of the Lord Jesus are preached. "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow, which is done unto Me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted Me in the day of His fierce anger."

"Behold a scene of matchless grace,
'Tis Jesus in the sinner's place;
Heaven's brightest glory sunk in shame,
That rebels might adore His name."

This is the preaching of the cross, those agonies, those bitter sorrows He endured.

Also His wonderful love is preached, "that having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them even to the end." They did not deserve His love; rather they deserved His vengeance. O but the love of

Christ to guilty, unworthy sinners, and the willingness with which He died on the cross for them! As we sang just now those beautiful, sacred words:

“It were an easy part
For Him the cross to fly;
But love to sinners fills His heart,
And makes Him choose to die.”

This is the preaching of the cross. It is the very foundation of the gospel. Without the cross there would be no gospel. The preaching of the gospel must ever be the preaching of the cross, that Jesus died, and why He died – not just the preaching of the Lord Jesus as a good Man or a godly example, or the preaching of what He taught. Have you noticed that the greater part of the gospels is all bound up with the death of Christ? It is central to the New Testament. It is central to the gospel. That is why at the Lord’s Supper we remember one thing, that the Lord Jesus died on the cross. He said, “This do in remembrance of Me.” It is His death, His cruel death, that precious, sin-atonement death that is to be remembered. This is the preaching of the cross, the cross of Christ, the way of forgiveness, the cross of Christ our only hope, the cross of Christ our foundation. True preaching has always been the preaching of the cross. This is the preaching that God has ordained. This is the only preaching that God will bless, the preaching of the cross. Every true, God-sent minister, has been a preacher of the cross.

Now in this preaching the name of the Lord Jesus is glorified. So Paul said, “I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” That does not mean that whenever Paul preached he just preached on the crucifixion. He did not mean that for one moment. But he meant it was central. There are so many things we have to preach. We have to preach man’s awful, lost, ruined condition by nature, but we have to preach it so that he will seek and value the cross of Christ. We have to preach the work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth, but the new birth takes place that sinners might feel their need of Christ and be led to Christ crucified. We must speak of the work of the Holy Ghost, but the great work of the Holy Ghost is making the Lord Jesus precious, especially in His cross. It is the preaching of the cross. This is what the gospel is, a once crucified but now risen and exalted Saviour.

“We preach Christ crucified.” We do not preach a dead Christ, but we preach a Christ who died and rose again. “We preach Christ crucified.”

Now beloved friends, the point here is that this preaching will always make a separation. It will always divide. To them that perish it is foolishness. To them that are saved it is the power of God. Paul often insisted on this point. He says, “We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock.” The Jews were the very religious. The Jews were self-righteous. But they stumbled at it. They said, “You cannot be saved, you cannot get to heaven, through a crucified Man!” “And unto the Greeks foolishness.” The Greeks were the intellectuals. The universities today study these ancient Greeks. They were some of the greatest brains the world has ever known. But they could not understand the cross of Christ. “We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

The preaching of the cross always divides and it will divide this congregation tonight. There will be some of you and you will say, “This is all I need. This is what I want. This is the only way I can get to heaven.” It will be attractive to you. You will say, “Thou, O Christ, art all I want,” a dear, dying Saviour, shedding His blood, making atonement for sin. And there are others and it means nothing to you. You may openly despise it, you may openly reject it, or it may be merely that you treat it with indifference. But it means nothing to you. “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?” Now there are some here tonight and the cross of Christ means nothing to you, and there are others here tonight and the cross of Christ means everything to you.

“Blest cross! blest sepulchre! blest rather be
The Man who there was put to shame for me.”

Not that all feel a personal interest in it. Some long for it. Some see it afar off. Some seek after it. O but blessed characters if this evening the preaching of the cross is not foolishness to you! Bring it down to the lowest point, if you can put your hand on your heart and say, “Lord Jesus, the preaching of Thy cross is not foolishness to me.”

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” Now I want to linger on this. It is not a very attractive subject, but it is a very important subject, that the preaching of the cross, salvation for guilty sinners, and that for ever and ever, without money and without price, through the cross of Christ, to them that perish it is foolishness. Let me linger on this solemn point. To the carnal mind, the cross of Christ will always be foolishness. The carnal mind cannot understand the doctrine of the cross. It is a terrible thing when people try to make the preaching of the gospel palatable to the carnal mind. You cannot do it. It is like trying to mix oil and water. You cannot do it. They are two opposites. Why is it people say they cannot understand it? In the following chapter Paul gives the reason: “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Those who are dead in sin can no more understand the preaching of the cross than a blind man can understand a beautiful scene.

You remember that story of the very fond mother. She had a little girl who was blind and had been blind from birth. But it was not an incurable blindness. The time came when after much hospital treatment, when the blindfolding was taken away, that the little girl could look out for the first time. The mother determined that when she could see for the first time, she would look out on a beautiful garden scene. When the girl first saw it, she said, “Mummy, why ever didn’t you tell me how beautiful it is?” With tears in her eyes the mother said, “My dear, I did. But you just could not understand.” That is how it is. We speak again and again of the beauties of the Lord Jesus, yet the God of this world has blinded your eyes that you believe not and you cannot understand.

The Countess of Huntingdon was one of the most godly women this country has ever produced. Her husband, the Earl of Huntingdon, was a very kind man and did all he could to help her, but he just could not understand the cross of Christ. On one occasion, he asked Whitefield to visit him and spend time discussing it. At the end, he said, “I just cannot understand it.” This was a man of high society, an intelligent man. The great William Pitt went to hear a simple gospel sermon. When he came out, he was bewildered. He said, “I just cannot understand it.” Now this is it: “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are

spiritually discerned.” I would encourage you to pray, “Open Thou mine eyes, that I might behold wondrous things out of Thy law.” There are wonderful things in the Bible, about the Lord Jesus, and about His cross. By nature we do not see it. I would encourage you to pray, “Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law.”

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” But there is another sense in which the preaching of the cross is foolishness. Often throughout the Bible we read of the foolish man, or sometimes just fools. Who is he? He is the man who does not want God. He is not a silly man, not a stupid man. But God calls him a fool. “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” I understand the original implies, “No God for me.”

“The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness,” in this sense, that those who are left to their own foolishness reject it. “We will not have this Man to reign over us.” Why? Why is the preaching of the cross not attractive? Why does it cause offence? Because it shows man in his true colours, as lost, sinful, ruined, vile. And proud man does not like it. One of the aristocracy once said to Whitefield, “You do not really mean, do you, I have got to be saved on the same ground as my servants?” There are no distinctions at the grave, no distinctions at the foot of the cross. There was a minister preaching early this century and a man said to him afterwards, “If that is the way of salvation, I do not want it. I would rather be lost.” Not many people say it; many feel it. The preaching of the cross lays us in the dust. It tells us we cannot do anything. It humbles us. It speaks of one way, and one way alone to heaven. It sets before us that the way of salvation is completely free. The preaching of the cross is foolishness because it is free.

A story is told something like this. In one of the little towns of England years ago a man tried to prove this. He said that at a certain time a golden sovereign would be given freely. He promised it to anyone who came to his house between set times. People began to laugh, and no-one went. People talked about it in the town. This man was honest. He made his promise and had his pile of golden sovereigns there. The people laughed about it and talked about it. Just at the end, about a minute before the closing time, one person said, “Well, I think I will try.” He went up and knocked on the door, and the gentlemen asked him in, and

asked what he wanted. He said, “Sir, you promised anyone who came a golden sovereign.” The gentlemen said, “Of course I did, and there it is.” When the man came out, it was past the closing time. There were crowds who came knocking and banging on the door, but the gentlemen said, “No, the time is past. I made a simple promise, and I meant it. None of you came. It was foolishness to you.” That is just what it is with the preaching of the gospel today. Many will come too late and knock at mercy’s door, and cry for a free salvation. May you and I not be found amongst them.

“The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” It is foolishness in this, for the simple reason that we have never felt our need. If there were some people coming out of a beautiful hotel having had a seven-course meal and you were waiting outside and offered them a piece of bread and butter, they would despise you for the foolishness of it. They are not hungry. If you went to a wealthy man and offered him fifty pence, it would be foolishness to him. Why? Because there is no need. And the preaching of the cross is foolishness to our natural minds because we have no sense of need. We are not hungry. We are not poor. You see, the vital thing is the new birth. The vital thing is a new nature. Once let the new birth take place: “Ye must be born again.” Once let our guilty souls be quickened into newness of life, then the preaching of the cross will not be foolishness to us. We have a soul which must live or die eternally. We have sins to be forgiven. We have a judgment day to prepare for. We are not ready.

“What must I do, or whither flee,
To escape the vengeance due to me?”

Then we listen to the preaching of the cross. We see it with new eyes. We listen to it with new ears. There is a new appetite, and the preaching of the cross is no longer foolishness to us. We think, Is this the same gospel that we have always heard? One of you said to me not long ago that after the Lord had opened your eyes and blessed you, you felt sure that I preached completely differently from how I used to preach some years ago. Then one day one of my sermons was published which was preached some years ago, and you found it was exactly the same as it is now. It is not the preaching that has changed; it is you who has changed. Like the old man who was quickened under John Kershaw’s preaching.

He went home and found a Bible, wiped the dust off it and began to read it. The old man said to his wife, "This is not the old Bible we used to have." She said, "It is the only one we have." He said, "This is a different book." His wife assured him it was the Bible they had always had. In the end he said, "If this is not a new book, I must have new eyes." That is just the very point. The new birth takes place. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." Then the preaching of the cross will no longer be foolishness to you. It will be the delight of your heart. You will long for it, glory in it. You will say, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is my only hope, my only plea. If ever I am to get to heaven, it must be through a crucified Saviour.

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness." O beloved friends, count it ten thousand mercies tonight if you can come right down to this point, that the preaching of the cross is no longer foolishness to you. "But" (this wonderful *but*) "unto us which are saved it is the power of God." "Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" To those to whom the preaching of the cross is foolishness, it means that they shall perish. But to those to whom the preaching of the cross is not foolishness, to those to whom it is the power of God, it is the vital evidence that they are saved.

What does it mean, the preaching of the cross being the power of God? O the power of God in the cross of Christ! It was more displayed in the cross of Christ than in creation. In creation, a word was spoken and the world was created. On the cross, a dear, dying Saviour took away the sins of all His people and saved a multitude that no man can number from sin, death and hell. He secured their salvation and made it sure. That is the power of the cross of Christ.

But here it is the power of the preaching of the cross of Christ. I do not know how many of you realise what power there is in preaching when it is applied by the Holy Ghost. It has turned nations upside down. It has turned hearts upside down. First there is the effect as a sinner is born again, quickened into life, made a new creature. And then the power of the preaching of the cross, that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins. Power, divine almighty power, power, gracious power to forgive your sins, to forgive my sins. There is power in the preaching of

the cross of Christ, power in that precious blood to cleanse away the vilest of sins, the deepest of stains.

“Dear dying Lamb! Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed church of God
Be saved, to sin no more.”

There is power in the cross of Christ to change your lives completely, to bring you out of the world, to subdue your sins, to deliver you from temptation; power in the cross of Christ to sanctify you, power in the cross of Christ to keep you – what the dear Saviour has done, His merit, His sacrifice, His finished work, to overcome every obstacle and take you to heaven at last.

Well, beloved friends, it is one side or the other. It is either “them that perish,” or “us which are saved,” and it is the cross of Christ that separates. “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”