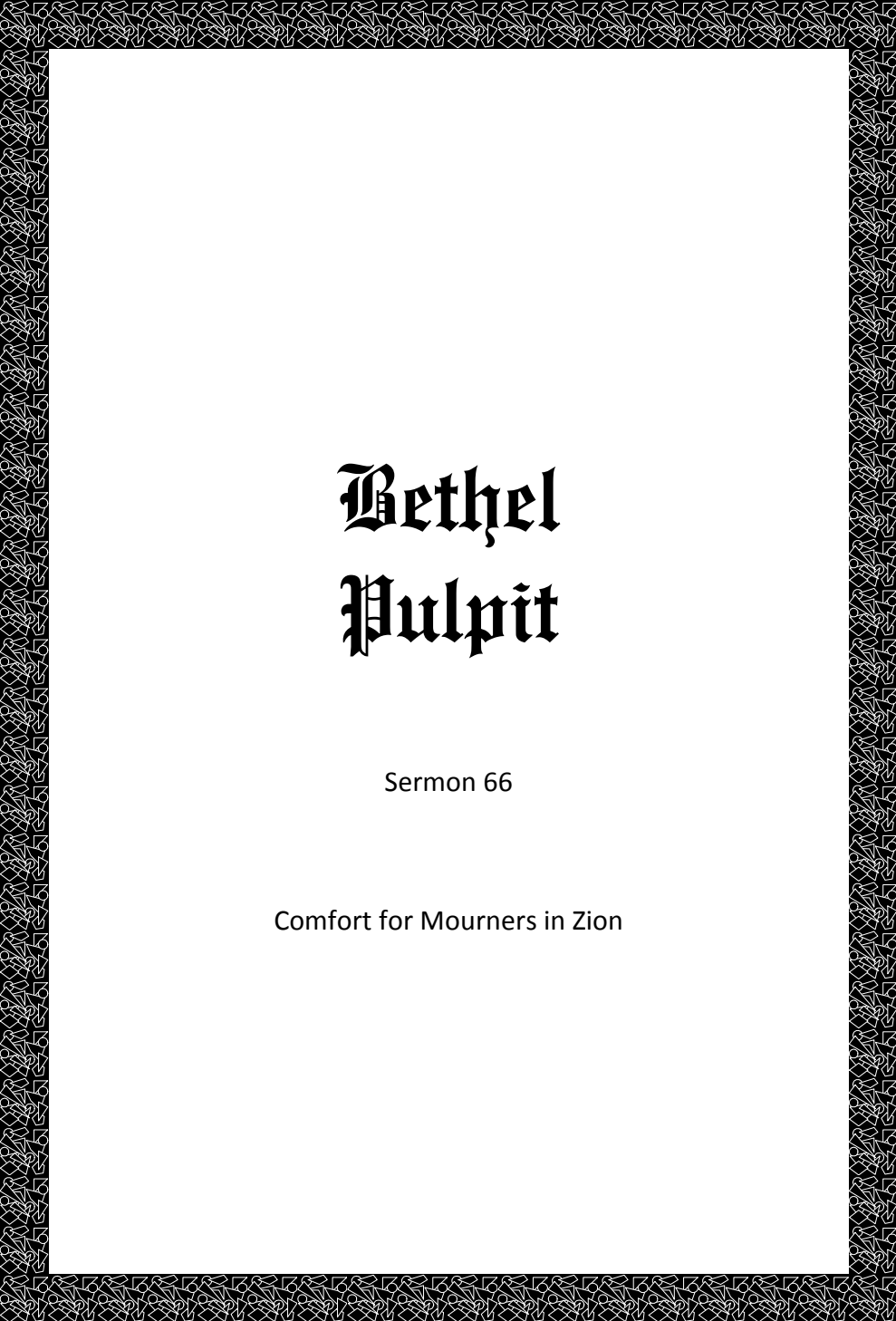




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 66

Comfort for Mourners in Zion

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 17th June, 1990**

Text: *"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Isaiah 61. 3).*

This is a divine appointment and divine appointments must be kept. How often human appointments are broken! You know it, you prove it all the time. There is an appointment; someone changes his mind, or someone is ill, or someone forgets, or something like that. The appointment is not kept; the appointment is broken. It may be beforehand you receive notice that the appointment will not be kept, or it might be at the last moment. That is human appointments. This is a divine appointment. They must be kept. They will be kept. If God makes an appointment with you and me, we shall have to keep it. If God makes an appointment that He will do something, He will do it. Understand me aright: really an appointment is stronger than a promise.

In Scripture we have two divine appointments especially which must be kept, one exceedingly solemn and one exceedingly blessed. The solemn appointment: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." Now that is a divine appointment. It must be kept by each of us, every one of us, however old or young, that appointment that we must die, that appointment that we must stand before the judgment seat of Christ. That is the solemn appointment. This which we have here is a blessed appointment. O what a blessed appointment it is, and equally, it must be kept: "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness"! What sublime language is used, and one comparison after another is multiplied to show the blessedness of it and the certainty of it; but really all of them are teaching this: this divine appointment – it is joy instead of sorrow; it is light instead of darkness; it is liberty instead of bondage.

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion." No doubt all of you realise that these verses at the beginning of Isaiah 61 were for ever

honoured by the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, because He began His earthly ministry with them. Remember in Luke 4 He went into the synagogue and the book was given Him and He began to read from Isaiah 61. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” “And He closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister”; and it has often been remarked that He stopped reading halfway through the verse. The Lord Jesus stopped at a comma; He did not even finish the sentence. What comes afterwards? “And the day of vengeance of our God.” And that is no less sure, no less certain. But that will be the work of the Lord Jesus when He comes the second time in power and in great glory. “The day of vengeance of our God”; but when He began His earthly ministry, He did not read that part of the verse. “To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord”; He closed the book and His opening remarks were these: “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” “And they wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth.”

Well, these are gracious words. When they were first spoken by Isaiah, they had an immediate reference to all God’s ancient people in all their sorrow in Babylon, and how they would be brought out; the certainty of it. It was a divine appointment, and there would be great joy and gladness. Then the Lord Jesus Himself takes it up and says, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” In a gracious sense He was going to “bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” – in other words, the sacred promise that He Himself would give joy instead of sorrow, light instead of darkness, liberty instead of bondage. It is a divine appointment, so it must be kept.

“To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion.” I wonder how many people here this morning are mourners in Zion. You see this word is very discriminating. There are wonderful promises, wonderful appointments here, but they are not for everybody, and they are not just for all who mourn, for all who are in trouble, for all who are sad. He puts a qualification: “Them that mourn in Zion.” I suppose there are thousands of people on earth this morning who are mourning. A wealthy man is mourning because His business has failed. A widow is mourning because

she has lost her husband. A young person is mourning because he has had a terrible disappointment in a friendship. Now these are mourners, but they are not mourners in Zion.

“To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion.” Now what is a mourner in Zion? Well, first of all, you will mourn because of what you feel in your heart, that by nature you are not prepared to approach a holy God. By nature you are not fit to die. By nature you cannot enter heaven. As you are brought to feel it, then you begin to mourn over it. That is a mourner in Zion. How many of you here this morning can go back to the time when you first became a mourner in Zion? You had to mourn concerning your sins, and your soul, and eternity. A mourner in Zion. You began to mourn because you could find no resting place in this world. You began to mourn because there was not a glimmer of comfort here below. And then as you sought the Lord, you began to mourn because He hid His face, because you could not find Him. You mourned because of the hardness of your heart, the poverty of your prayers. You began to mourn because you could not repent. These are the mourners in Zion. It is not everyone, it is not all that mourn. It is the mourners in Zion. Let me be clear: often earthly sorrow and spiritual sorrow go together. How often the Lord has brought an earthly sorrow into the heart of a person, into the life of a person! They have been crushed beneath it. And perhaps they have tried to pray in their sorrow, but as they have tried to pray in their sorrow, they have begun to realise something of the enormity of their sin and guilt. “Thine’s alas a lost condition.” Sometimes, of course, it works the other way round. A person in the depths of trouble and sorrow prays and God most graciously answers, and then that person begins to realise that there is something even greater, something even more important: where shall I spend eternity? It is “to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion.”

There is another aspect of it. “Them that mourn in Zion.” The world mourns, sinners mourn, the ungodly mourn. But God’s people mourn at the blood-sprinkled mercy seat. Now never forget that: that in Zion, in the temple there at Jerusalem was the mercy seat sprinkled with blood. Now mourners in Zion will always mourn at that mercy seat sprinkled with blood. Even if it is a providential care, a providential sorrow, a providential concern, yet as you mourn, you have to bring it to that blood-sprinkled mercy seat. That is in Zion. Above all, as you feel

the greatness of your soul's concern, as you mourn over it. "Blessed are they that mourn," said the Lord Jesus, "for they shall be comforted." You will mourn in Zion. You will mourn at the blood-sprinkled mercy seat. You will mourn at the feet of Jesus.

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion." Now there is another aspect of it, and it is this: mourners in Zion – when we tremble for the ark of God, when we look round at the state of the church of God on earth, sometimes even when we look into our own midst, and we find so many things to make us mourn. Are you a mourner in Zion? Everything may be going well in your life, in your family, in your business, in your circumstances. But you grieve for the cause of God and truth, and so you become a mourner in Zion. Well you see, there is a divine appointment here. May you mourners in Zion sweetly prove that there is a set time to favour Zion. Why do you mourn in Zion? Because God has appointed it. And as surely as He has appointed that you should mourn, so surely has He appointed your deliverance. We read that beautiful word: "Your sorrow shall be turned into joy." Only God can do that. We read this morning of a woman in travail having sorrow (John 16. 21). But then her sorrow is forgotten for joy that a child is born into the world. (As we read those verses, my heart went out to those of you who very soon are expecting your babies. May you sweetly prove that joy because a child is born into this world.) But then you see that gracious promise, and it is to the mourners in Zion. "Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you." It is a divine appointment. It must be kept.

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." What an exchange! In a sense, he says the same thing three times over, but with such a beautiful variation. Let us try to look at them more closely one by one. "To give unto them beauty for ashes." Now at our special prayer meeting on Monday evening, you remember that we did think a little bit about this in the ninetieth Psalm. "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us." Those prayer meeting prayers, may they still be continued. Do not leave them behind in chapel. Take them home with you. "Return, O Lord, how long? And let it repent Thee concerning Thy servants. O satisfy us early with Thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days

wherein Thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil. Let Thy work appear unto Thy servants, and Thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish Thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it.” Now this verse is a good commentary on the ninetieth Psalm. The ninetieth Psalm is a good commentary on this verse.

“To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes.” In ancient Israel if a person was really sad, he would go about with ashes on his head. They were an outwardly demonstrative people. You do not find it today. If a person was heartbroken with sorrow, everybody could see it. He would have ashes sprinkled on his head. The promise here is that all that is going to be altered. Instead of ashes, there is going to be beauty. I often speak to you about contrasts in Scripture. This is a contrast: beauty, ashes. But you see, above everything else in a gospel sense it is this (and this is a gospel chapter): the beauty of Christ’s righteousness for the ashes of your own. Because when God the Holy Ghost begins His solemn, separating work in your heart and conscience, there will be a burning up. He will appear as the Spirit of burning. He will burn your creature religion, and He will burn up your own works, and burn up your creature righteousness. He will burn them into ashes. “When Thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, Thou makest His beauty to consume away like a moth.” All these things you were once satisfied with, you see them all burnt up as ashes. What a blessed exchange! “To give unto them beauty for ashes” – the beauty of Christ’s righteousness to cover your naked soul. You see the ashes of your own righteousness and the beauty of that everlasting, heavenly dress, the beauty of the wedding garment of the saints, to be completely covered in it, washed in the Saviour’s blood, covered, clothed in His righteousness.

“This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years.”

When this whole world is burnt to ashes, Christ’s righteousness, your everlasting, heavenly dress, cannot be burnt up, destroyed, or burnt to ashes.

“To give unto them beauty for ashes.” It is a gift, a free-grace gift, a gift in love and mercy. But it is hard work for a sinner to part with the ashes of his own righteousness, and receive the beauty of Christ’s. We

will be cleaving to our old self, something we have done or might be able to do. But to renounce it all as ashes and naked fly for refuge to the beauty of Christ's righteousness.

“Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress.”

“To give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning.” Only God can turn mourning into joy. Present-day scientists can turn all kinds of things into all kinds of other things, but no-one has ever discovered the secret of turning mourning into joy. “The oil of joy for mourning.” You dear mourners in Zion, we think of those promises. “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.” As you sow in prayer and gracious exercise, “he that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”

“The oil of joy for mourning.” There were a few verses I looked at this morning in Jeremiah 31. This is the oil of joy for mourning. This is the divine appointment for all the mourners in Zion. “They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all. Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together.” Now this is it: “For I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow. And I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness, and My people shall be satisfied with My goodness, saith the Lord.” That is a divine appointment for the mourners in Zion.

“The oil of joy for mourning.” Now why should the Holy Ghost speak of joy as oil? I take it here He is referring to anointing oil. First of all, it comes from above. It has to be poured on you. It is not something you work up. It is not lifting your head up, it is not cheering up. It is something that comes down, something the Lord pours upon you. “The oil of joy for mourning.” And then it is very sweetly fragrant. It is very precious. The anointing oil was very fragrant and exceedingly precious. We think of Mary of Bethany and the woman who was a sinner anointing

the feet of Jesus. The whole house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Beloved mourners in Zion, when you feel the oil of joy poured upon you for mourning, it will be very sacred, very precious.

“Mourning souls, dry up your tears;
Banish all your guilty fears;
See your guilt and curse remove,
Cancelled by redeeming love.”

If the Lord pours His blessing upon you, if you feel His love, His mercy, His smile, His forgiveness, that will be the oil of joy for mourning. It is the one instead of the other, the one displacing the other; and it will flow. You will not have to *try* to pray then. You will not have to *attempt* to thank God. It will be the oil of joy, and you will find it sweetly, freely flowing. “The oil of joy for mourning.” Now may you dear mourners in Zion this morning find that the set time to favour Zion is come and feel that oil of joy poured upon you. It will refresh your weary spirit. It will make you rejoice. “The oil of joy for mourning.”

And then, “The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” Well, some of you this morning perhaps know what this heaviness is. That is, you feel burdened. You have things which weigh you down, things which make you sad. Perhaps some of you have had heavy tidings. Perhaps some of you have heavy sorrows. Above all, some of you feel the heaviness, the weight of your sin. Now who is there here this morning in a spirit of heaviness, and you mourn in Zion because of it? There is a divine appointment here: “The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” The wise man tells us that “heaviness in the heart of man maketh it stoop.” And perhaps some of you are proving it. You have heaviness in your heart, sorrow, affliction, things that trouble you. It makes you stoop, it bows you down. It almost breaks you, almost crushes you. And then one of the Lord’s *buts*, one of those glorious *buts* of the gospel: “But a good word maketh it glad.” May the Lord in love and mercy speak that good word to mourners in Zion, that you might have “the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.”

We read, very solemnly read in the gospels that the dear Lord Jesus in His sin-atonement sufferings knew this spirit of heaviness. When the Lord Jesus turned aside into the Garden of Gethsemane, when He began to shed

as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground, we read that He “began to be very heavy.”

“Who can penetrate through thee,
Gloomy, sad Gethsemane?”

“He began to be very heavy,” and well He might, with the whole of the sins of all His people in all ages now being laid upon Him. “He began to be very heavy.” “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him” – caused to meet upon Him – “the iniquity of us all.” O what an intolerable weight, that must have sunk a world to hell! “And He began to be very heavy.” But the heaviness of the Lord Jesus, when not only the sins of His people lay so heavy upon Him, pressing Him down, but now almighty wrath, the wrath of His eternal Father against sin, began to fall upon His sacred head. The awful weight, the awful heaviness of it! Yet you see in bearing those awful sins and in bearing that awful curse, He for ever bore them away, and that is the ground of all His people’s joy and all their liberty. O but may you dear mourners in Zion this morning who feel the heaviness of your spirit look to a suffering Saviour in the garden and on the cross. “And He began to be very heavy.”

“Zion’s mourners, cease your fears;
For lo! the bleeding Lamb
Utterly forbids despair
To all who love His name.
Him your fellow sufferer see;
He was in all points made like you.
Are you tempted? So was He.
Deserted? He was too.”

“The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” I understand that this word *heaviness* is very strong. It can almost bear the meaning of despair. It may be there is one here this morning and you say, “Heaviness does not really fully describe my case. My case is one of despair, black despair.”

“Lo! the bleeding Lamb
Utterly forbids despair
To all who love His name.”

There is a divine appointment for the mourners in Zion.

“To give unto them the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” Why does he call praise a garment? Well the spirit of heaviness, that is something inward, something in your very heart, something that the world cannot see. It is the spirit of heaviness. “The heart knoweth his own bitterness.” But when the Lord blesses you, when He appears, when He delivers you, when He fulfils His divine appointment, then you will wear praise like a garment, and those around you will see the difference. They will see you rejoicing, and God’s people will rejoice with you. But it is a divine appointment. Those of you who this morning mourn under the spirit of heaviness, there is appointed for you the garment of praise, and you will praise God for His love and His mercy, and you will praise the Lord Jesus for His sin-atoning blood, and you will praise the Holy Ghost, that He did not leave you in your sin and shame, but brought you to feel your need, and that He gave you the spirit of heaviness so that of necessity you were driven to the Saviour.

“To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” Just one or two concluding observations. First of all, you notice that this is all of grace. It is a free gift. And it is the Lord who does it all. The sinner is nothing. Christ is everything.

Then secondly, you notice that the general spirit and figure of this chapter as it begins is that of the jubilee, slaves set free, debts forgiven, prisons opened. The whole point is one of liberty for those who are in bondage. Now it is to the mourners in Zion that the year of jubilee is promised. When the jubilee trumpet was blown, it did not mean much to those who were not in prison, to those who had no debts, to those who were not slaves smarting beneath the whip. They were not mourners in Zion. But when the jubilee trumpet sounded on the great day of atonement, proclaiming liberty through the land, the slave rejoiced, and the debtor rejoiced, and the poor prisoner rejoiced. It is an appointment for mourners, for the prisoners in Zion. And still the jubilee trumpet sounds on the great day of atonement and it still speaks liberty.

“The gospel brings tidings, glad tidings indeed,
To mourners in Zion, who want to be freed.”

It is for the mourners in Zion.

“What sweet invitations the gospel contains,
To men heavy laden with bondage and chains;
It welcomes the weary to come and be blessed
With ease from their burdens, in Jesus to rest.”

It is the spiritual jubilee. “To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”
“To proclaim liberty to the captives.” And it is to the mourners in Zion.
And it is an appointment.

And finally, the fulness of this beautiful word is to be known in heaven. It is everlasting joy for ever and ever. It is “beauty for ashes.” You look at the dear saints of God in fine linen clean and white, for fine linen is the righteousness of saints. “The oil of joy for mourning.” You look at the joy of the saints in heaven, no more sin, no more suffering. “The garment of praise.” There is one thing that marks all those who sing the everlasting song. Each one of them was once a mourner in Zion. It is only these mourners in Zion who now join in the everlasting song and crown Him Lord of all. “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

“To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion.”