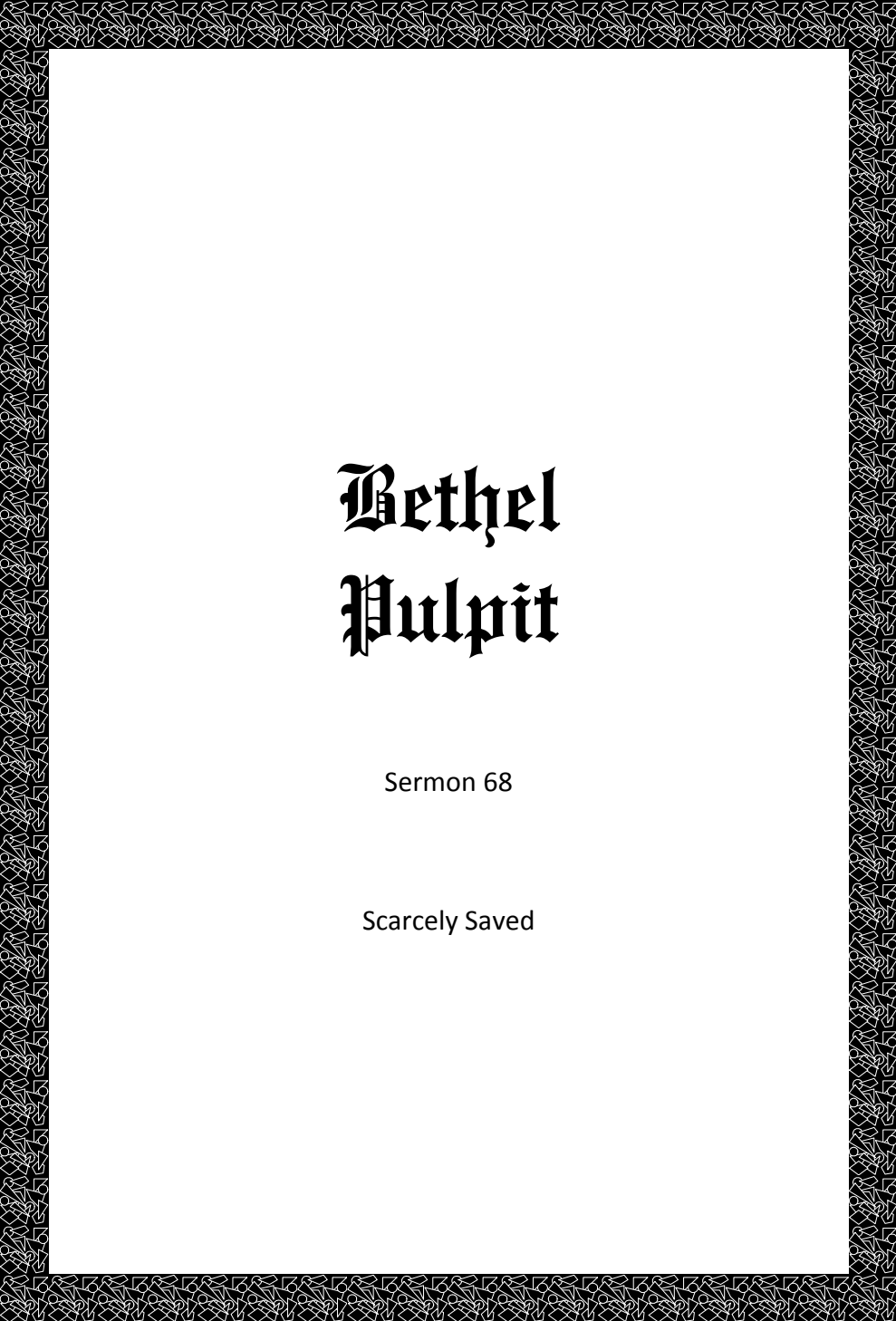




# Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 68

Scarcely Saved

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,  
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,  
on Lord's day morning, 24th February, 1991**

**Text:** *“And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” (1 Peter 4. 18.)*

The way to heaven has never been easy; it never will. Being a real Christian is not easy. Rutherford says,

“I’ve wrestled on toward heaven,  
'Gainst wind, and storm, and tide.”

Now that is not easy. So here God Himself gives us a most solemn warning, and beloved friends, in some ways this is one of the most startling words in all Scripture. He tells us that even His own people are scarcely saved. “If the righteous scarcely are saved.” Job speaks of being delivered by the skin of his teeth. It seems a startling thing when God Himself tells us that His people are only scarcely saved. It is not going to be easy. It is going to be hard. It is going to be difficult.

When the Lord Jesus Himself wrought out salvation for His people, it was not easy. In that sense, the righteous scarcely were saved. They were not saved by some divine command as in creation: “Let there be light: and there was light.” It was necessary for the agonies and blood-shedding and death of God’s incarnate Son. We sing sometimes that unspeakably solemn word:

“Bore all incarnate God could bear,  
With strength enough, and none to spare.”

Now do you believe that? It seems clear that had the Lord Jesus been only a man, merely a man, He must have sunk, must have been crushed beneath His agonies. It is very clear that His divinity gave support to His humanity. “If the righteous scarcely be saved.” Well, it is so when you view it in the Lord Jesus and His sin-atonement death. But it is so with all God’s people. Not one of them will find it an easy thing to get to heaven. All of them will find it hard going, at the beginning and at the end and all the way to heaven.

Now let me be exceedingly clear. There is no uncertainty whatsoever about the salvation of any of God's people. They are all eternally safe in Christ, safe from eternity to eternity.

“Long as the covenant shall endure,  
Made by the great Three-One,  
Salvation is for every sure,  
To every blood-bought son.”

There is no uncertainty about salvation. It is not from the divine standpoint, it is not from God's view, that the righteous scarcely are saved. Why, they were as safe, in union with Christ, before the world was created as they will be at last when landed safe in heaven. From God's side there is no uncertainty. But with us, God's people scarcely are saved. It is a hard thing; it is not going to be easy. It is going to be difficult.

Lot found it a hard thing to get to heaven. He was almost carried away. The flesh seemed to prevail over the spirit. He made solemn choices, wrong choices, and if you read the Scripture carefully, it seemed as if the angel almost dragged him out of Sodom and Gomorrah, and he lost his wife and his family in the process. You would hardly know whether he was saved or lost until you come to the New Testament and the Holy Ghost says, “Just Lot,” and puts the question out of question. But he was only scarcely saved.

So it was with Samson. He began so well, with desires for the honour and glory of God, such hatred against Israel's enemies, such willingness to spend and be spent. Women were his downfall, and you see him succumbing to the lusts of the flesh. Samson did not find it easy work getting to heaven, although he was the strongest man who ever lived. You would hardly know whether Samson was saved or lost, until you come to Hebrews 11 and find him listed amongst the worthies.

What about the wisest man who ever lived, Solomon? He was only scarcely saved. Many people, even godly people, have even doubted Solomon's salvation, though I believe if you examine the evidence carefully there is no doubt that he was a saved character. But he was led astray, and you do not read much of his end. He was the wisest man who ever lived, yet he almost perished in his foolishness.

What about David, the man after God's own heart? He came to heaven like a vessel with the sails shattered and the masts broken, limping into the harbour. The man after God's own heart was scarcely saved. Think of the shepherd boy, think of Psalm 23. Is it possible that this man, this godly man, this grace-taught man, could be an adulterer and a murderer? Do you really believe that you have the seed of every sin in your heart, that if you were left to yourself, you could be an adulterer and *you* could be a murderer? If the Lord cease to uphold and protect you for one moment – do you believe this? – there is not any sin, but left to yourself, you could commit it.

David was scarcely saved when he came to his last moments. He looked back over his past life, he looked through his kingdom, and looked at what had happened in his family. If David was scarcely saved, some of his children were not saved at all. They followed his bad example and perished in their sins. You parents, watch your example. You might be forgiven. You might come scarcely to heaven at last. But what about a wicked Absalom, what about an ungodly Amnon? They were not scarcely saved: they were eternally lost. “Although my house be not so with God.” That word was pressed out of David's heart: he wept it out, he groaned it out. “Although my house be not so with God,” yet he was saved at last. “He hath made with me” – even me, such an unworthy, guilty sinner as me – “He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation.”

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” Thinking of this, the best commentary you could find anywhere on this verse is Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. There you have this man, Christian, called by God's grace, wrought upon by the Spirit, fleeing from the city of destruction, setting out on pilgrimage towards heaven. But he was scarcely saved. He did not find it easy. It was hard going: the Slough of Despond, the Hill Difficulty, the Castle of Giant Despair, the Enchanted Ground, the fight with Apollyon, Vanity Fair where his friend became a martyr, the swellings of Jordan at last. He said, “I begin to sink.” “No,” said his friend, “I feel the bottom and it is good.” You think through *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was not easy work; it was hard work, “wrestling on towards heaven, 'gainst wind, and storm, and tide.”

“And if the righteous scarcely be saved.” So beloved friends, this word sounds out loud and clear to you and me, that it is not an easy thing getting to heaven. You must not take it for granted that you are on the way to heaven, that you are going to get to heaven at last. You need to wrestle on, “‘gainst wind and storm and tide.” You cannot be half-hearted about it. It is something your flesh cannot do, something you can only do by divine enabling. You will need to seek mercy every hour. You will need to be upheld, to be kept. You will need to say,

“Let but Thy own almighty arm  
Sustain a feeble worm,  
I shall escape, secure from harm  
Amid the dreadful storm.”

It will not be like some kind of hobby which you do on a Friday evening. It will take all your time, and all your strength, and all your health, and all your vitality, everything, the whole of you. It is not going to be easy work getting to heaven. It is not just coming to chapel on the Lord’s day. Thousands come to chapel on the Lord’s day who will never get to heaven. It must be first. If your religion does not come first, and if it does not come first in everything, then it will never get you to heaven. Now do not take these things for granted. Thousands are perishing through a take-it-for-granted religion. People in our chapels are perishing through a take-it-for-granted religion.

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” It is going to be hard work. There is not going to be anything easy about it. You think of the comparisons God Himself gives concerning the Christian life. It is not just talking about religion. It is not just beginning. It is carrying on. It is a completing. If we think of these who are scarcely saved, like Lot, and Samson, and Solomon, and David, well what about those who seem to begin well, who seem to make a good start, and the Word of God tells us they were not saved at last? They perished in their sin. What about King Saul? Didn’t he make a good beginning? Didn’t he begin well? What about Ahithophel? David said, “We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company.” What about Judas Iscariot? What about Simon Magus? He deceived even the apostles. What about Demas? He is mentioned in one of the epistles among those worthies who sent greetings. What about Lot’s wife? I should think of people in the

Old Testament she witnessed more wonderful things than any. She witnessed more wonderful things than you and I have witnessed. She was probably there when the promises were given to Abraham, there when God spoke to him, there when the angels came down from heaven. She had that most marvellous experience, being brought by an angel, a divinely sent angel, out of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet she looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt, and perished in her sin.

Along the way to heaven, you can see the beacons. Along the shores of England you can see these beacon lights. There have been wrecks there and you need to be careful. When we were in America, travelling in Montana, you could see by the roadside a little cross. There might be two crosses and in some place there might even be six. We enquired what they were, and were told wherever there had been a road accident and someone killed, they put a little cross by the side of the road. It was very salutary. Along the way to heaven, there are these places where those who have seemed to begin well have turned aside, and perished in their sin.

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” So the Lord speaks of the Christian life as a heavenly race. He says, “So run, that ye may obtain.” Now He speaks of some who started off so well in the race; then they lagged behind and dropped out. He says, “Ye did run well: who did hinder you?” There are many analogies and comparisons here, but the most simple seems to be this. If you are running in a race, there is only one thing which really matters, and that is to come to the end, to be victorious. A man may have all kinds of interests, but when he is running that race, it is the only thing that matters. “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” “If the righteous scarcely be saved.” It is a race. “So run, that ye may obtain.” We are bidden not only to lay aside the sin which doth so easily beset us, but to lay aside every weight. What does that mean? Get rid of anything, everything, however good, however right, that does not help you on the way to heaven. Because it is not going to be easy. It is going to be hard. It is enduring to the end. “He that endureth to the end shall be saved.”

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” If it is compared to a race, it is also compared to a pilgrimage. Where does the “scarcely” come in? The dangers of the way, the opposition of the world, the temptation, the allurements of the world, the awful opposition of Satan, above all, our unworthy, sinful, guilty selves. O that pilgrim way that has to be walked out! “Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock,” “looking unto Jesus.”

If this way, with its hardships and its difficulties, is compared to a race and a pilgrimage, it is also compared to a voyage – the sea, the storm, the darkness, the winds, the waves.

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” Now God has said it, and if God had not said it, I do not think any preacher dare have said it. People would say, “Don’t you believe in eternal security? Are you not contradicting eternal, covenant realities?” But God Himself has said it, that even the righteous, even His own people, are scarcely saved. They *are* saved, all of them shall be saved, they must be saved, and that with an everlasting salvation. But it is not going to be easy work. It is going to be hard, “wrestling on towards heaven, ’gainst wind, and storm, and tide.”

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” If anyone ever realised the awful truth of this, it was Simon Peter. Here he is writing as an old man, in love. He wants to give a warning to his younger brethren. Peter could say, “I am one of these. I believe I shall be saved at last, but I am one of these who only scarcely are saved.” Peter would not have said that years before. He said, “Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee.” Yet very soon, he was denying his Lord and Master with oaths and curses. Would you believe it, that the great Apostle Peter himself, so fervent in love and zeal, would you believe he could deny his Master with oaths and curses? He was afraid of what a little servant girl said. Well, do you believe *you* could do such things if left to yourself? “If the righteous scarcely be saved.” Peter knew what it was to be forgiven, to be delivered. He heard the cock crow. He saw the Lord looking upon him, that look of such anguish which pierced him through and through, that look of such love which freely forgave him. Peter to his dying day knew what he had escaped from, what he had been delivered from. He knew that he was scarcely saved. “He went out, and wept bitterly.” But he knew what happened to his old friend. Let us be clear about it, Judas

Iscariot must have been a good friend to the others. Peter knew what happened to his old friend who had gone preaching with him, who had performed miracles with him. He knew that he too had gone out in his sorrow, but he hanged himself – a suicide's death.

So the Lord left this on record for your warning, for my warning, that we cannot settle down. When I was a boy, the old preachers in Lancashire used to have a saying that “you will not get to heaven in carpet slippers.” They would then follow it and say that you will need shoes of iron and brass instead, because the way is hard and rugged.

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” Well then, what effect should this have upon us? There are two or three things. “If the righteous scarcely be saved.” First of all, there is a solemn call here to us to watchfulness. We need to be watchful. We need to watch our steps. We need to ponder the path of our feet. We need to watch our own spirit. “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain.” It is solemn if we are half asleep on enchanted ground. May the Lord make you and me watchful. Now “if the righteous scarcely be saved,” may the Lord make you and me watchful lest we perish in the way.

The second thing is this: if the righteous scarcely be saved, then how dependent we need to be, realising our own weakness and helplessness and sinful infirmity. O to be made so dependent! “Myself I cannot save, myself I cannot keep.” Realising we can no more keep ourselves than we can save ourselves, having to lean heavily on an almighty arm, to lean heavily on Christ, to rest all our dependence there – no leaning on self, no leaning on a creature.

“If the righteous scarcely be saved.” And the third thing, we shall need to pray our way to heaven, pray our way “‘gainst wind and storm and tide,” pray every step. That word is often quoted (it is a lovely word): “They shall ask their way to Zion with their faces thitherward.” The implication is that it is a new-born soul asking its way to Zion. Well, it is, but it does not end there. It is *all* the way to heaven we need to pray our way along.

“Lord, hast Thou made me know Thy ways?  
Conduct me in Thy fear;

And grant me such supplies of grace,  
That I may persevere.”

It is one thing to begin – but it is to continue, it is to endure to the end.

“For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God” – not with Saddam Hussein, not in the Houses of Parliament, not in the law courts. “The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.” That is where the judgment is coming to. The nation will be judged, the world will be judged, but it is going to begin at the house of God. “If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” How are you going to go on when judgment begins at the house of God, when this one is manifest as he truly is, a hypocrite; when this one is manifest as what she is in the sight of God, nothing but a deceiver. “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.” There is going to be a purging. Zion’s God is going to purge His floor, and none but the choicest grain will stand, and the chaff will be blown away.

“How stands the case, my soul, with thee?  
For heaven are thy credentials clear?  
Is Jesus’ blood thy only plea?  
Is He thy great Forerunner there?”

“For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?” It is not just to hear the gospel preached: it is to *obey* the gospel of God. It is not just to listen to the gospel: it is to *obey* the gospel. A solemn call to repentance, it is to obey it. A gracious call to faith, it is to obey it. A call to separation from the world, a call to walk in the narrow way which leads to life. “The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?” Now what a solemn need for watchfulness and dependence and prayer! What a solemn need for what we have here in verse 19: the committing of the keeping of our souls to Him as unto a faithful Creator! I find that an attractive word, to “commit the keeping of their souls to Him ... as unto a faithful Creator.” “Commit thy way unto the Lord,” and in committing thy way unto the Lord, committing the keeping of your never-dying soul to the Lord, “trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.”

“For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved” – if God’s people find it hard work getting to heaven, if they do not find it easy, if only scarcely they are saved – “where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” Now the Lord asks that question, and He does not give an answer. The answer is assumed. It is so plain, it is so obvious. It is an unanswered question. And the Lord leaves it to you yourself to supply the answer.

“If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” Where shall they appear? I wonder why the Lord has a repetition: the ungodly and the sinner. I take it that there are two classes. There are some who are openly ungodly. Either they never attend the preaching of the truth, or if they do come, then they have no interest. “If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” And then the sinner, those who are respectable, those who have the cloak of godliness, those whom people think well of, yet they know nothing of the reality. They have a profession, but they have no possession. Hypocrisy is their religion. Now it is not just the ungodly, but the sinner. “And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die” – that is both the openly ungodly and the sinners in Zion. “And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein.” It is a solemn thing to be found among the two parts. Many belong to the second part and they glory in it. “Two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein.” “If the righteous scarcely be saved.” “And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on My name, and I will hear them: I will say, it is My people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God.”

“And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” Where shall they appear when the Lord for them shall call? Where shall they appear when time shall be no more? Where shall they appear when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ? “If the righteous scarcely be saved” – if it is not easy for them, if it is hard

work for them, if they are only just saved – “where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”

Years ago there was a very godly, gracious man. He was very burdened because he had two sons who did not show any spiritual interest at all. They had not the slightest concern. They had listened to preaching, heard these warnings, and it had no effect upon them at all. That good man began to pray a special prayer. His prayer was that when he came to die, both his sons might be there to see how a Christian dies, that he might so be blessed with life and joy and peace, and give such a gracious testimony, that his two sons would be affected by it and brought to repentance. Well, the time came, and his two sons were there, and the dear man died in the dark. Outwardly, he was almost in despair. Yet the Lord used it to the salvation of both those two ungodly sons. They said, “If our dear father, the most godly man we have ever known, should know such darkness and despair when he comes to a dying hour, whatever will happen to us?”

“If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”