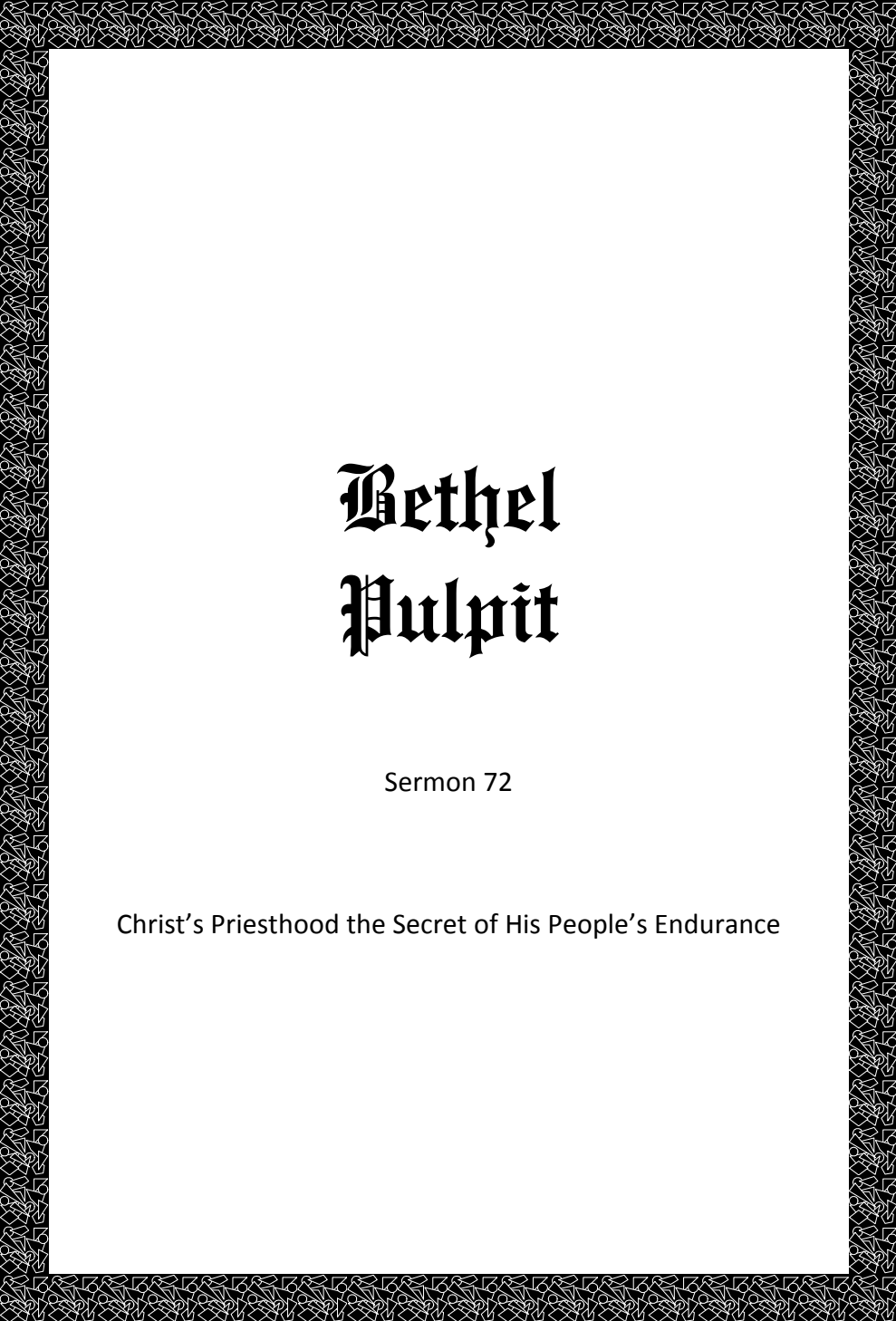




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 72

Christ's Priesthood the Secret of His People's Endurance

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 23rd June, 1991**

Text: *“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession” (Hebrews 4. 14).*

There are two things here which, when you look at them at first, seem to be completely dissimilar, completely disconnected. They do not seem to have anything to do with one another. Yet God here has joined the two of them together. The two things are: first of all, the Lord Jesus as a great High Priest entered into heaven, risen, exalted, glorified; the second thing, His people on earth making a profession of His name, continuing in it, holding it fast to the end. At first, those seem to be two completely different things. They are both important things, both insisted on, spoken of in the New Testament, but so different. Yet, “What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

The way I want to lead you, with God's help, into this subject this evening is first of all just to say one or two things concerning this great High Priest passed into the heavens, and then to say one or two things about this other point of us holding fast our profession. The main thing this evening is how the one completely, entirely hangs on the other.

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” Well then, first of all this great High Priest risen and ascended and exalted. In the Old Testament there were many high priests. They could not continue by reason of death. They offered the sacrifice of animals; that blood could never really avail. They went into the most holy place, the holiest of all, but then only once a year; then they had to offer for themselves. It was all so shadowy, so dark, so symbolical. There was no reality in it. You could not say of any one of Aaron's line, “We have a great High Priest.” In the light of the Epistle to the Hebrews, they were all *little* high priests. “Ah,” says the apostle, “we – that is God's people in gospel days, we – that is the church of God since Jesus has come – we have a great High Priest.” He

offered one sacrifice, the sacrifice of Himself; He needs to offer no other. His work is for ever completed. So the believer sings,

“Jesus, my great High Priest,
Offered His blood and died;
My guilty conscience seeks
No sacrifice beside.
His powerful blood did once atone,
And now it pleads before the throne.”

“We have a great High Priest.” Israel’s high priest offered the sacrifice and then he passed out of sight into the holy place made with hands, the holiest of all. “Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.”

“We have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens.” He offered His sacrifice, He died, He was buried. But the grave could not hold Him. He rose triumphantly. In His glorious ascension, He passed into the heavens.

“He passed within the veil,
Did on His bosom bear
The worthless names that did prevail
With Him to enter there.”

“We have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens.” And then we are told who He is: “Jesus the Son of God.” Now that is vital. It is because of who He is that there is the wonderful value in what He has done. None but Jesus, the Son of God, could be this great High Priest. Let us be clear, beloved friends: ministers, preachers are not priests. These men you may see in their robes, they are not priests. There is one great High Priest, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Then, *every* sinner saved by grace is a priest. What does it mean? Two things. Every believer as a priest has the privilege of direct access to God through Christ. And secondly, every believer has the privilege of offering the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

You may remember the story about the conversation which took place in a London restaurant. A Roman Catholic was boasting about confessing to his priest, and a man there, noted as a very strong Protestant,

was agreeing with him. The people could not understand. “Ah,” said the Protestant, “the point is, he confesses to the wrong priest. But the doctrine is true: you must confess to the priest. But,” he said, “as a sinner I have to confess my sins to a great High Priest in heaven.” We do confess our sins to a priest, but not a merely human priest, a divine High Priest. The only one who can forgive sins has nail prints in His hands. You have heard of that woman some years ago. The Lord had blessed her; she had been brought out of Romanism. She was very aged, and almost senile. When she was dying, a Roman Catholic priest (so called) came to see her. After talking to her he said, “I have come to forgive you your sins.” Of course, he wanted some payment for it. “Wait a moment,” the old woman said feebly. “Do you mind showing me your hands?” The Roman priest was amazed, but in the end he agreed. When she saw his hands, she said, “Sir, you cannot forgive my sins. The only Man who can forgive my sins has nail prints in His hands.”

What an unspeakable mercy if one sinner here tonight can say, “We have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God”! That is, if we have a little sweet hope that He is ours. “May I with sweet assurance claim a portion so divine?”

“We have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.” Every blessing, every favour comes to guilty sinners through Him. The only approach to a Holy God is through Him. He ever lives to intercede for those who come to God by Him. “We have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.”

Now then the other part of the verse, the second part: “Let us hold fast our profession.” This is a point that is insisted on so much in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Let me just remind you why. These early Jewish Christians were enduring terrible persecutions. They were being disinherited by their own families. Fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters were refusing to speak to them. They were faced with such arguments as the fact the Jewish religion had been given by Almighty God. They were under awful pressure to turn back. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to encourage them not to turn back, to warn them of the many, many dangers of turning back. In chapter 3: “Christ . . . whose house are we *if* we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.” Then again: “For we are made partakers of Christ, *if* we hold the

beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.” It is this continuing, it is this enduring that matters. Multitudes start well, but then fall by the way. They do not carry on. They do not continue. They do not endure to the end. So there are these continual reminders in Scripture of the necessity of continuing, the necessity of enduring, or as it is put here, holding fast our profession. Now this does not only mean being baptized and joining a church. It includes such things as prayer, reading the Word of God, gracious exercises, the whole of the Christian life, the Christian pilgrimage, the heavenly voyage, the heavenly race. All this is bound up in this word “profession.”

I understand in the original this word “hold fast” is exceedingly strong, just as if you were going through a town at night, and you had some treasure. You have to hold it fast. You are in danger. It is likely to be wrenched away from you. Now you are so weak, so feeble, so helpless. You have so many enemies. The devil is against you and your own sinful, unbelieving heart is against you. This is not something which is hard; it is something which to flesh and blood is just impossible, this holding fast our profession. Yet the epistle has these solemn warnings against those who do not hold fast, and the many exhortations to hold fast. Let me just say this here before we go any further: the only way in which you and I will ever hold fast is if the Lord Himself in love and mercy holds us fast. They are solemn words, aren’t they: “Whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end”? And again: “We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.”

Well briefly, beloved friends, those two things: an exalted High Priest, and God’s people, toiling, struggling here on earth. But you see this intimate relationship. That is the main point I want to lay before you this evening, with a desire to be a help to you in your pilgrimage and seeking that you might be established in the faith. Let me open it up something like this. When the Lord Jesus was here upon earth, on one occasion we are told it was evening and He went up to the top of a mountain to pray, all alone. Before He went, He constrained His disciples to get into a boat and sail to the other side. Then midnight came. There was a terrible storm. The wind howled. It seemed the ship was going to be wrecked. The disciples were not making any headway. The winds were contrary to them. And the Lord Jesus was not with them; He was up in the top of the

mountain alone. There are two things, and at first they seem to have no connection one with the other, but they do; they have an intimate connection. It is this: “And He saw them toiling in rowing.” They could not see Him. “It was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” They were in the heat of it, the burden of it. They feared shipwreck. There was the Lord Jesus afar off. But His loving, watchful eye was upon them. He was waiting to be gracious to them. At the appointed moment He was going to come right where they were, walking over the raging sea, to command deliverance for them, bring them safely to the other side. “Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid.” Now it is something like that with us, something like that with this verse. The Lord Jesus has gone up to heaven, we are here on earth in the midst of the awful conflict, the wind beating against us, blowing us out of course. We cannot see Him. Now this is it: “He saw them toiling in rowing.”

“Cheer up, ye travelling souls;
On Jesus’ aid rely;
He sees us when we see not Him,
And always hears our cry.”

Well then, to come right to the verse: “Seeing then,” or in other words, *because*, because “we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” The one thing, as I tell you so often, about the Word of God is the way it comes right where we are. It is not some theological textbook. It is not like some of these modern doctrinal writings which are absolutely right, but they are like a box of nails laying side by side, as cold as steel. There is no comfort there. You have this wonderful truth, this wonderful revelation of a great High Priest, the Lord Jesus. But it is what He is doing for His people, what that He is willing to do for them, what He has promised to do for them. Are they concerned, are you concerned, am I concerned, about our little profession, or about our pilgrimage, about our life and walk and conversation? How can we hold it fast? In other words, how can I endure to the end? How can I manage without falling into error? How can I go on without falling into sin, without bringing disgrace on the truth? I am so weak, so helpless. Now this is it. For this very reason, because we have Someone in heaven, and our concerns are His concerns, our cares are His cares, our sorrows are His sorrows. Because of this, on this very ground, on this foundation – that is how you are going to endure to the end, that is

how you are going to continue, that is how you are going to stand, that is how you are going to maintain your lot against Satan, that is how you are going to come to heaven at last.

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” There are so many things in Jesus the Son of God at God’s right hand there exalted, so many things that are yours, so many things for your help and comfort, so many things for your salvation, so many things to bring you safely through, so many things that ensure that you can never perish.

And first of all there is the compassion of this great High Priest passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. O what a beautiful subject divine compassion is, divine sympathy! What an emphasis is placed on it by the apostle in this epistle! Even one of the old high priests must be one who could show compassion. It was one of his qualifications. “We have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities” – the wonderful compassion of the Lord Jesus! Beloved friends, tonight as you go on in your Christian life, you are troubled, you have a hard heart, your prayers are not what you would have them, there is besetting sin, you have so many obstacles, problems. “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest” – His tender compassion, His loving sympathy. He knows, He understands, He cares. Now that is how you can hold fast your profession. You have a Friend in heaven, a Friend who knows all about you, even the worst, and loves you all the same. A Friend who sympathises with you in your terrible distress. But it is not a helpless sympathy. Because He is Jesus the Son of God, He is almighty.

“He sees when I am sunk in grief,
And quickly flies to my relief.”

Sometimes your dearest friend will not really understand, or perhaps does not really sympathise. But the Lord Jesus will never fail to sympathise. He understands that secret groan. A bruised reed He will not break and the smoking flax He will not quench; He will send forth judgment unto victory. He understands.

“He knows what sore temptations mean,
For He has felt the same.”

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” His loving sympathy, His tender compassion.

Now the next thing for your help. Here you are with your problems, your difficulties. How can you hold fast? It is as if you are trying to cling to something and someone is trying to knock your hands off. What about this great High Priest? He is passed into the heavens.

“With heaven and earth at His command,
He waits to answer prayer.”

He is almighty, He is divine, and His power is put forth for His people, not against them. He sees those awful struggles. He is mightier than your sin. He is mightier than Satan. He is mightier than your circumstances. He holds all nature in His hands. What does He say? “Come boldly unto the throne of grace, that you may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest” who is almighty, who is a prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God.

“That were a grief I could not bear,
Didst Thou not hear and answer prayer;
But a prayer-hearing, answering God
Supports me under every load.”

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest.” Now another thing is this: Paul, writing the second Epistle to the Corinthians, says: “Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.” The implication is that he was ready to faint. The implication is that God’s people are often ready to faint. Talk about holding fast? Ready to faint. But why did he not faint? Why did he carry on? “As we have received mercy.” We are told that this great High Priest is a merciful and faithful High Priest. That is a beautiful word, isn’t it? “In all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.” You are ready to faint, not hold fast. “As we have received mercy, we faint not.” The immensity of mercy in an exalted High Priest!

You notice the apostle joins this word “faithful.” He is not only merciful, but He is faithful. It is interesting, when he comes to the end of

his epistle, he takes up again this very word we have here. He says, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith,” and there he adds a bit more to it; he says: “without wavering.” If that were the end, it could almost sink us. Then there is a little piece in parenthesis, in brackets: “(for He is faithful that promised.)” The mercy of this great High Priest, the faithfulness of this great High Priest! So you can carry on, you can press on.

“Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son,
Bids you undismayed go on.”

He will not leave you. He will not fail you. He will not forsake you.

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” Are you tempted to turn back? Do you feel you have to give it up? The mercy you long have sought is not for you. A word like this, “Let us hold fast our profession,” just troubles you. It seems to cut you off. May you be able to see this great High Priest. You cannot see what you want to see in your own heart. You see many things you do not want to see. But may we see Jesus.

“Does Satan tempt you to give up,
And call no more on Jesus’ name?
Cast not away your little hope;
Come hither, and behold the Lamb.”

That is the ground on which you are holding fast your profession, the compassion, the mercy, the faithfulness of this great High Priest who is almighty, who, with heaven and earth at His command waits to answer prayer. He is able to keep you from falling. He is able to uphold you, to maintain your lot.

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest.” Some of you say, “But the point that really concerns me about this holding fast my profession, the carrying on, enduring, is my sin, my unworthiness, my guilt, my vileness.” Well it says, “We have a *great* High Priest.” Our fears are great, our enemies are great, our sins are great. But we have a *great* High Priest. There is an answer here. What is it? When here on earth as a Priest He offered His blood, offered the sacrifice and died. Now in heaven He ever lives to intercede. He presents the merit of His death. There is acceptance. There is forgiveness through the merit of His blood.

It is this: “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” “But this Man, because He continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.”

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest.” Some of you are perhaps thinking about some special conflict, or perhaps some move in providence, or perhaps some are afraid about turning back. Some of you are perhaps thinking about an open profession you have made. You do want to hold it fast to the end. You do not want to dishonour it. Perhaps some of you are concerned, burdened about making an open profession. Perhaps the point you are so tried about is this: what if I make a profession of the Lord’s name, and then I bring disgrace on it? Well, you are not the first one who has had that temptation. I think almost all of God’s people are tried on that point, what if I should profess the Lord’s name and then be left to myself and sink at last? Well really it is this: we have a great High Priest who will not leave us to ourselves to sink at last, a great High Priest who is able to keep you from falling and bring you safely through, and present you faultless before His throne with exceeding joy.

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” In a word it is this: whatever you and I need here on earth is there provided in all its fulness in the Lord Jesus in heaven.

“Whate’er I need in Jesus dwells,
And there it dwells for me.”

It is bound up with that wonderful promise, “But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” “My every need He richly will supply.” In our profession, in our pilgrimage, in the conflict, we need so much help. Well, He is able to give it. He has promised to give it, divine help, almighty help. But we need so much strength. “Thy God hath commanded thy strength.” But we are so empty. “It pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell.” But there is our foolishness. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” All the grace you need, and O how much grace we do need, daily grace,

hourly grace. “God is able to make all grace abound toward you.” The fountain whence it flows is this great High Priest who is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. “He giveth more grace” – daily grace for daily needs, and grace mightier than sin.

“Plenteous grace with Thee is found;
Grace to pardon all my sin.”

What about your troubles and trials and problems and sins? “My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” So you see how this evening’s sermon links up with the recent sermon on the need to be established: “rooted and grounded in love.” It is just the same here, holding fast your profession as you are found depending completely on a great High Priest passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. It is all in Him. It is the sinner nothing, it is Christ everything. My desire is that you might be established in the truth, that it might be a help to you as you and I continually feel the hardness, the roughness of the way, our weakness, our helplessness – to view God’s promise and the secret of it all: all the help and strength and wisdom and grace that we need. That is the ground upon which you will hold fast your profession.

The presence of the Son of God exalted in heaven is the pledge that one day all His people will be with Him where He is. He is spoken of as His people’s Forerunner. “Whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an High Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” His people are one with Him, identified with Him. As a great High Priest He bears their unworthy names upon His heart. As certainly as He has entered heaven, so surely one day they shall enter heaven. As surely as He has conquered, so they must conquer. As He is victorious, so they must be victorious. The battle is the Lord’s. “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony.” He cannot be in heaven and one of His people be left behind, one of His people left out, one of His people fallen by the way.

It is said that in his last days that great yet very eccentric preacher, Rowland Hill, became almost senile. He used to roam about his house

muttering, talking to himself. The thing he was saying to himself more than anything else was this:

“This I do find,
We two are so joined,
He can’t be in glory
And leave me behind.”

Do you believe it, the oneness of Christ and His people, the indissoluble union between Christ and His church, that where Jesus is there they must be? This great High Priest prayed for them, even for the weakest, “Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My glory.” Well, may you as a sinner view a great High Priest, view your interest in Him, your oneness with Him, and may you be able to say, to sing with good Rowland Hill, despite all your sins and all your fears,

“This I do find,
We two are so joined,
He can’t be in glory
And leave me behind.”

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.”