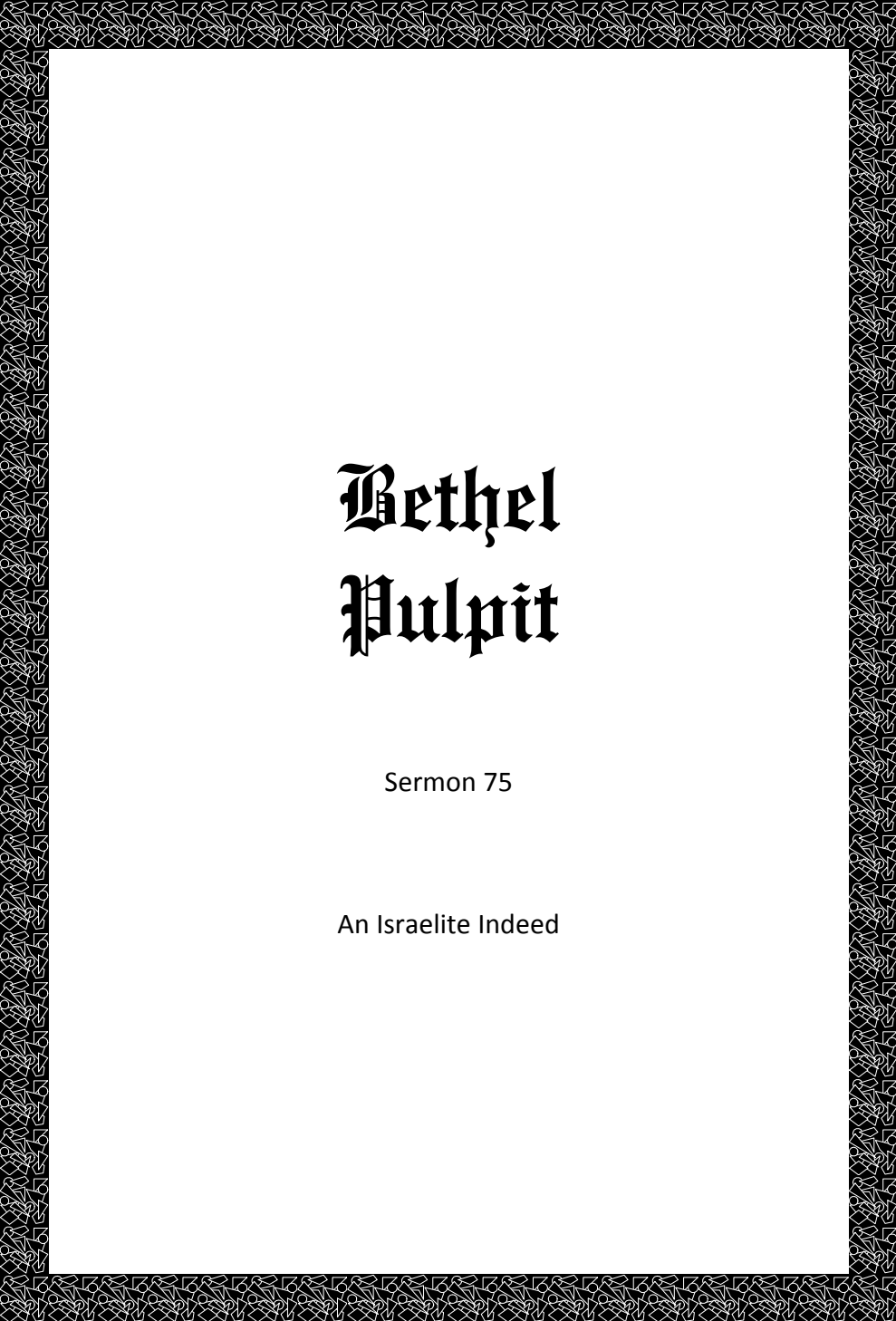




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 75

An Israelite Indeed

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 8th September, 1991**

Text: *“Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! Nathanael saith unto Him, Whence knowest Thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee” (John 1. 47, 48).*

In quite a few verses here, we have a cluster of precious souls gathered to the feet of the Lord the Lamb, to shine for ever as jewels in His crown. O but did you notice the mysterious sovereignty of God? How different was the way in which they were brought, yet they all came to exactly the same place, to the feet of Jesus. Perhaps some of you this morning are troubled on this point. You feel you have never heard of anyone with an experience just like yours. That used to be one thing which troubled me so much in my early days. It seemed as if the way I was being brought was different from everyone else, and that used to try me. Perhaps some of you are troubled on this very point. Now the Lord uses such different means, but the vital point with each one is this – to be brought to feel that the dear Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, is the one thing needful. If you have that in your heart this morning, that will do: that the Lord Jesus is the one thing needful, that you must have Him, that you cannot do without Him. The mark of the Holy Spirit's work is always this, concerning the Lord Jesus: “And unto Him shall the gathering of the people be.” They come from such different places, in such different ways, but they are all brought to His feet.

With the first two, it was under the preaching. John the Baptist preached, “Behold the Lamb of God,” and two of them were graciously affected. Then we find that one of these went and spoke to his own brother, and the Lord used that meeting with power. But then Philip was personally called by the Lord Jesus. There were not any outward means at all. Did you notice it: “The day following, Jesus *would* go forth” – not just that He went forth? “Jesus *would* go forth.” There was an eternal covenant appointment to be fulfilled. There was a sinner to be wrought

upon. The appointed time had rolled on apace, “not to propose but call by grace.” “The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow Me.”

Now this morning it is Nathanael we especially wish to speak about. Dear Nathanael! May the Holy Ghost, and may the preaching this morning, find out a few Nathanaels in our congregation. Nathanael was one of those unusual cases of Scripture. By unusual, I mean this: as the Old Testament dispensation came to an end, but before the Lord Jesus died and rose again triumphant, and the Holy Ghost was poured out, there were a few like Anna and Simeon – and Nathanael was one of them. God had already dealt with them, His holy fear was in their hearts, but they were just groping after the truth; they could not see anything clearly. Dear Nathanael was one of these.

The way in which Nathanael was brought to a clear knowledge of the truth was through Philip, through Philip’s witness, through Philip’s testimony. Philip said to Nathanael, “We have found Him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write.” “We have found Him.” May there be a few here who shall be able to say that, “We have found Him.”

“Now I have found the ground wherein
My anchor, hope, shall firm remain.”

“We have found Him.” The only reason you will find the Lord Jesus is if He has found you.

“We have found Him.” Now the interesting thing is this, that Philip’s testimony was very weak and very defective; yet the Lord very graciously used it in the case of Nathanael. That encourages us, doesn’t it? With all our faults, and sins and mistakes, with all our blunderings, that does not mean the Lord cannot use us, that the Lord will not use us. What is it? “That no flesh should glory in His presence.” “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” What was defective in Philip’s testimony? He said, “We have found Him . . . Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Now Philip should not have said that really, should he? Jesus was not the son of Joseph. He was the Son of Mary; He was the eternal Son of God; but He was not the son of Joseph. There were so

many things Philip did not know. There was the obscurity, there were the errors in his testimony.

Then, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Nazareth was a despised place, just like we would speak of one of the slum districts of Liverpool, or one of the rough areas of London. Nazareth! Surely Philip could have said something better about the Saviour he had found than this! “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” But the Lord used that faulty testimony. But whenever there is a defect in the testimony, it always causes some confusion, and it did here.

The first thing we hear Nathanael saying is, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Prejudice was aroused. That is why it is so important that in preaching, the doctrine should never be defective. I think in the history of the church of God, where there has been some defect in doctrine, even in a godly minister, there has always been a sad and solemn result in the experiences of his hearers. Philip says, “Jesus of Nazareth,” and Nathanael’s prejudice is aroused. “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Beloved friends, always beware of prejudice; it will never do you any good. Remember what John Bunyan said in *The Holy War*, when Immanuel sent his messengers with a message to the town of Mansoul. Old Mr. Prejudice went to hear what he was going to say, and Bunyan quaintly remarks, that he took forty men with him, and they were all stone deaf. Not long before he died, Mr. Frank Gosden said he had noticed two things which had done great harm in our churches: partiality on the one hand, and prejudice on the other. May we be delivered from partiality; may we be delivered from prejudice. “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

This is better from Philip now: “Philip saith unto him, Come and see.” There is nothing to be hidden in the gospel, there is nothing which will not bear close scrutiny, there is nothing which will not stand up to your examination. “Come and see.”

But then the Lord Jesus Himself most graciously intervenes. He saw Nathanael coming to Him. He sees those of you this morning who are venturing on Him.

“Venture on Him, venture wholly,
Let no other trust intrude,

None but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good."

"Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him." Now I hope there are a few Nathanaels here this morning, and I hope the Lord Jesus Himself might find you out. "Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Beloved friends, these are the salt of the earth. These are the glory of our churches, these Nathanaels, Israelites indeed, in whom is no guile. We have had them here, haven't we? And we have known them, and loved them, and we sorely mourn the loss of them – Israelites indeed in whom is no guile.

Now whatever did the Lord Jesus mean when he pointed to a poor, sinful man and said, "In whom is no guile"? Well, let us be clear, He did not mean he was free from sin; that can never be. But He meant two things. Firstly, he had the mark of forgiveness. Now the mark of a forgiven sinner, the God-given mark of a forgiven sinner, is this: "in whom is no guile." That may surprise you, but that is the Holy Ghost's testimony (Psalm 32. 1, 2): "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity" – now this is it – "and in whose spirit there is no guile." It is the mark of a forgiven sinner. And secondly, it is the mark of the redeemed in heaven. "These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no guile." "An Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." It is the mark of a forgiven sinner; it is the mark of the redeemed in heaven.

Now what does it mean? Those two lines have been running through my mind:

"Contrite hearts cannot dissemble;
God has slain them with His sword."

When the Lord performs a true work of grace in a sinner's heart in the new birth, then you will be delivered from guile; you will be made honest; you will be made transparent. Your religion will be before God, in His holy, tender, filial fear. It will be to set the Lord ever before you. You know He can see you through and through. Then your hypocrisy will have to go. Your desire to make an impression on other people will have to go. It will

not be so much that you want other people to think well of you; it will be, “Let my sentence come forth from Thy presence.”

“An Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.” There will be reality. You will want to be right. You will not want to lay claim to anything you do not possess. You will not want there to be any contradiction between the way you speak and what you really are. You realise that God knows the innermost secrets of your heart, and you do not want other people to think anything different. “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile” There is plenty of guile in us by nature, and there is plenty of religious guile in us by nature. We like to make a good appearance, and we like people to think well of us. O but an Israelite indeed! He is what he is, and he is what he is by the grace of God. Now may the Lord make us Israelites indeed, whatever else, whatever stage of experience. However little we know, may we be Israelites indeed. May there be no dissembling, may there be no deceit, may there be no hypocrisy, may there be godly sincerity, may our hearts be made contrite, and may they tremble before our God; because in the great day that hastens on, all guile will be exposed, and all guile will be swept aside.

Of course, the great and glorious example in this is the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.” And the grace of God will make you a follower of the Lamb. You will not be sinless, but the grace of God will make you guileless.

“Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile!” Beloved friends, this is the point, and it comes close. This is what the Lord Jesus thought about Nathanael, not what someone else thought about him. The thing which really matters is what the Lord Jesus thinks about you and me – not what we think about ourselves, not what other people think about us. There are many in our chapels who think they are going to heaven, resting on the good opinion other people have of them. That is no stronger than a spider’s web to build your everlasting hope upon. Everyone in this chapel might think you are right, but what good will that do you in the great day, if the Lord Jesus thinks you are wrong? O that we might go home with this point – it is what the Lord Jesus thinks about you, it is what the Lord Jesus thinks about me.

“Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” And what effect did it have? It gave Nathanael a solemn shock. As far as we can tell, humanly speaking (and I emphasise that, humanly speaking), neither had Nathanael seen the Lord Jesus before, nor had the Lord Jesus seen Nathanael, but the solemn shock was this: that the Lord Jesus knew everything about him, though Nathanael had never seen Him, and humanly speaking the Lord Jesus had never met Nathanael. It came as a solemn shock to him. “Nathanael saith unto Him, Whence knowest thou me?” Has it ever come as a solemn shock to you, that the Lord Jesus knows everything about you? It did to the woman of Samaria: “Come, see a Man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?”

“Nathanael saith unto Him, Whence knowest Thou me?” Now listen to this answer. “Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” Now in eastern countries, these fig trees have leaves and foliage which come right down to the ground, so a person could creep under a fig tree and it would be like a little room, or a little tent to him. It is very obvious here that Nathanael had a fig tree which he used to go under. From the context it seems very clear that he went under the fig tree to meditate on the Word of God, and to pray. The Lord Jesus tells him that when he was under the fig tree, and no human eye could see him, the Lord’s eye had been upon him. “Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” O, this is exceedingly solemn, the holy eye of God which is never closed, which never slumbers, which never sleeps. “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.” Whatever we do, whatever we say, wherever we go, however secret, however dark the night, there is an eye in heaven which follows us and sees us and watches us. This was a solemn shock to Nathanael. “Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.”

I think I have often told you over the years of that building with an eye painted on the ceiling; when people enter, they are so careful what they do, how they behave, what they say. They feel someone is watching them. It is only an eye on the ceiling. O to have that realisation of the holy, eternal eye of God ever upon us! Even when you are under the fig tree, that is, when you are hidden away, concealed from sight, where no human eye can see you; when you think what you are doing is unknown,

unnoticed, “when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” Now where have you been during this week? Where were you last night? God’s eye could see you. God’s eye is ever upon you.

“When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” The whole point about this fig tree is that it is a secret place, it is a hiding place, it is a place completely concealed, it is a place nobody knows anything about, it is a place where you can be completely hidden away. “When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” Well, when the eye of Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree, it is evident that Nathanael was there in prayer and meditation. At the end the Lord Jesus said to him, “Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.” Nathanael realised this was a miracle. Well, it was.

It was a divine eye which saw Nathanael under the fig tree. This passage is one of the clearest evidences of the Godhead, the divine Person of the Lord Jesus. I do not know whether you have ever noticed, but each of the gospels seems to have its peculiar character. What of the Gospel according to John? Well the emphasis all the way through is that Jesus is the eternal Son of God. The emphasis is on His Godhead, on His divine power. This is an interesting subject, a vast subject, and I am not going into it this morning, but you look at it when you come to John. Matthew and Luke begin with the Lord’s birth at Bethlehem; Mark begins with John the Baptist and the preaching of the Lord Jesus; but the Gospel according to John begins with the Lord Jesus in a past eternity. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” You watch it whenever you read John. There are some things which appear in the other gospels, and they are omitted completely from John, and there are some things which do not appear in the other gospels, and they appear in John. The emphasis right through is that this glorious Person, this glorious Man, is none other than the eternal Son of God. Now this is one of the beautiful marks and evidences of it. We do not read this account anywhere else. But here Nathanael was clearly convinced that this Man who spoke to him must be the Son of God. He knows all things, He can see all things.

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.” This was a miracle, but Nathanael was to witness some of those

greater miracles that the Lord Jesus performed. It is usually agreed that Nathanael and Bartholomew are one and the same person, and that this man was one of the twelve disciples. So he witnessed greater things than these – those wonderful miracles, and then the transactions at Calvary, and then all the wonders of the resurrection morning, and then the glories of the Day of Pentecost.

“Thou shalt see greater things than these.” The Lord still says this to His poor, humble, fearing Nathanaels, who feel they do not know much, who feel they are only beginning. He says, “Thou shalt see greater things than these. And He saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Obviously this is a reference to Jacob’s ladder at Bethel. That is why it is usually thought that when the Lord looked on Nathanael under his fig tree, he must have been reading or meditating on the account of Jacob’s ladder; otherwise this word has not any meaning, any significance. “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” What did that mean to Nathanael? He was going to have a fuller, more glorious revelation of the mediatorial Person and work of the Son of God, that mediatorial ladder which connects earth and heaven, by which a guilty sinner on mercy’s ground can come where Jesus is. But then also it speaks of the last great day, the glorious coming of the Son of God. It speaks of heaven. “Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” In other words, Nathanael, the best is yet to come.

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” Well, how many of you here this morning have your fig tree, the place where you shut yourself away, the place where you have to wrestle with God in prayer? It may be pleading for mercy, forgiveness, cleansing in the Saviour’s blood, to be made right for heaven; or it may be the awful burden you carry in providence, and you have to keep going away under your fig tree, and there wrestling and pleading for the answer. But one thing is clear. When you are under the fig tree, there is a loving, tender, gracious, watchful eye upon you. Though no-one on earth knows your burden, your exercise, and though your words are inaudible – O the mercy of it! – “When thou wast

under the fig tree, I saw thee.” Those feeble desires and longings and groanings of your heart: “When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.”

“Those feeble desires, those wishes so weak,
'Tis Jesus inspires, and bids you still seek;
His Spirit will cherish the life He first gave;
You never shall perish if Jesus can save.”

“When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” Well you can take it further back than that. We sing, “He saw me ruined in the Fall, Yet loved me notwithstanding all.” Before time began, before angels were formed, or men, or the world created, the Lord had His loving affectionate eye upon all the objects of His choice, all whom it was His purpose to redeem. He saw them as they would be born, and He saw them as, through the Spirit’s work, they would be born again, and He saw them as they would have to creep under the fig tree, burdened and longing for deliverance. “I saw thee.” O the wonder of it! You dear Nathanaels, may the Lord Jesus find some of you out this morning. He says, “I saw thee” – the same almighty God who said to Moses at the burning bush, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them.” “When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” This same Jesus, risen, exalted, glorified in heaven, a great and glorified High Priest, He still sees you, your cares, your burdens, your sorrows. He knows, He understands, He cares. “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

“When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” It brought Nathanael prostrate at the Saviour’s feet as a true believer on the Son of God. He is not talking like Philip now, about the Son of Joseph, or Jesus of Nazareth: “Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.” Christ revealed, made precious to his soul; Nathanael a guilty sinner worshipping at His feet. Jesus his only plea, his only hope. Well, may there be a few poor Nathanaels here this morning – Christ made known, revealed, made precious to your soul. But may you be prostrate at His feet in love and adoration, and worship the Son of God, your only hope, your only trust. “Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.”