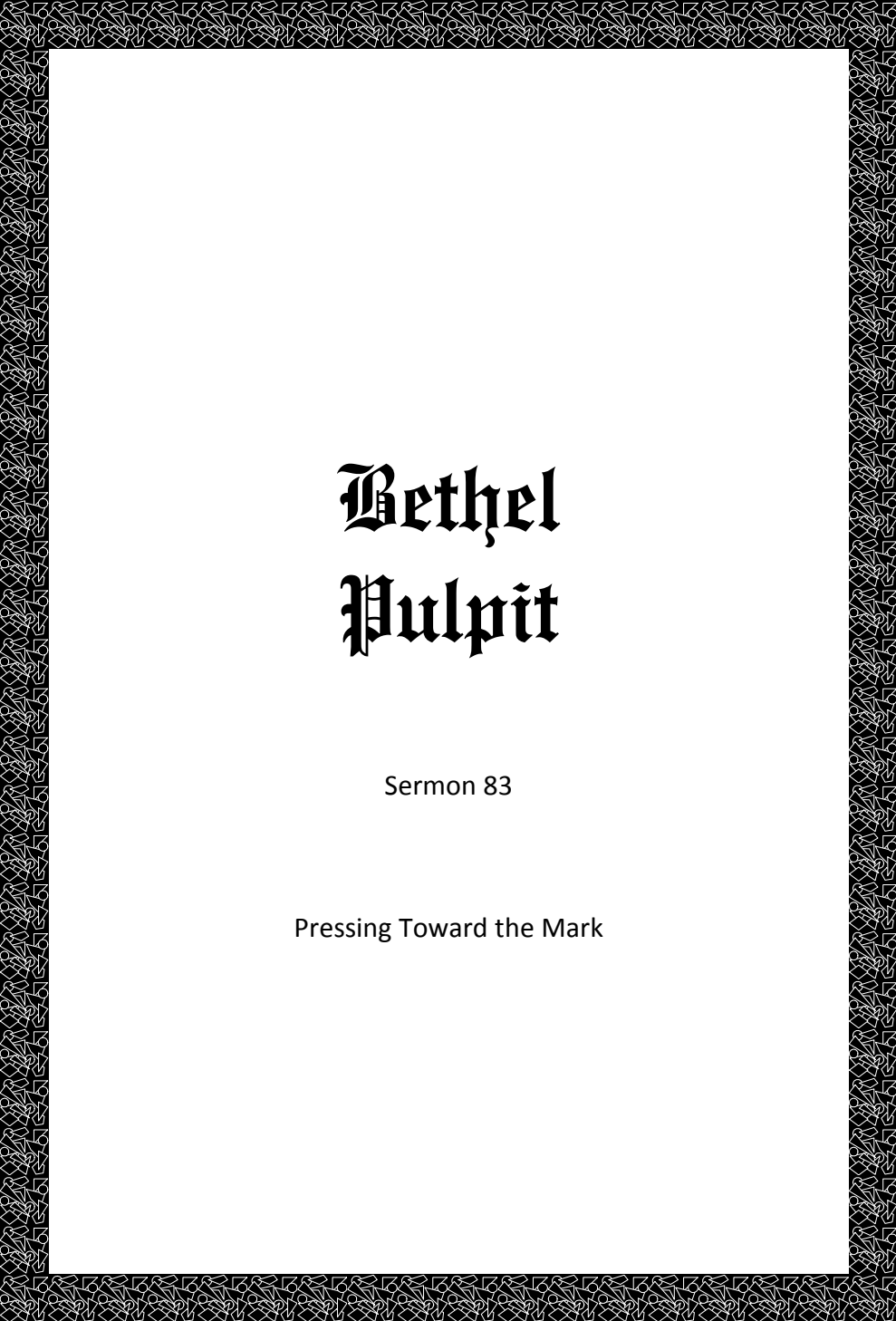




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 83

Pressing Toward the Mark

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 31st May, 1992**

Text: *“Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but 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” (Philippians 3. 12-14).*

You notice that Paul uses this word “apprehend.” It is a word not used very much nowadays. When it is used, it is usually concerning the arrest of some criminal or something like that. We read of someone being apprehended by the police. And whenever it is used in Scripture, it is used in that sense. For instance, we read of Herod apprehending Peter, putting him in prison. It is a strong word. It is an interesting word. Really Paul uses it like this. Whenever God deals with a sinner, whenever the new birth takes place, whenever God calls that sinner by His grace, He apprehends that sinner. That is, He lays an almighty hand upon him. That is, He arrests him. That is, He takes hold of him. We sometimes sing,

“Grace is a firm but friendly hand,
Put forth by God to save His own.”

So the apostle speaks of the time when he was apprehended. He was a stranger to God and to grace. He was a persecutor, an enemy of God's people. He was on the road to Damascus, determined to hale men and women to prison, and God apprehended him. And if you and I, beloved friends, this morning are on the way to heaven, then there has come a time in our lives when the Lord apprehended us – no doubt not with the same outward circumstances as the Apostle Paul, but just as real, just as sure. O there must be this divine apprehension. There must be the Lord stopping us, hedging up our way, laying His hand upon us, taking us in hand, dealing with us. So at the beginning this morning I affectionately ask you each this question: did there ever come a time in your life when the Lord in His love and mercy apprehended you?

Now Paul says, “That I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended.” What does that mean? That God took hold of Saul of Tarsus that there might be certain things that he himself might take hold of. So if the Lord has dealt with you and me in love and mercy, He has laid His hand upon us that there might be these various things on which we might lay our hands.

“That I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended.” Now beloved friends, I just want to speak of this in two ways, first of all providence and secondly grace. If the Lord has apprehended you, then there is a calling for you in this life for you to apprehend. I would this morning press this point on each of you, young and older. The Word of God very clearly speaks of the thing we do in our life as a calling, as God’s calling, not just as work, not just as an occupation, not just as a job, not just as employment. The scriptural term for it is a calling. I think you will find the old Puritans, especially John Bunyan, would say, By calling he was a farmer, or by calling he was a tradesman. It is an expression which seems to have dropped out, but it is very scriptural. It is not just to be called by God’s grace in a way of salvation. On the other hand, it is not just to be called by God’s grace to be a preacher. If you and I have been apprehended by the Lord, taken in hand, there is a calling and we are to apprehend it. We are to find out what that calling is, and then we are to walk out that calling. Scripture does teach that perhaps usually if a person is older when he is called by grace, he is to abide in that same calling in which he was called – not always, but oftentimes. But the point, beloved friends, is this. We should look on our life as a calling. A mother staying at home doing housework, bringing up her children, if she fears God, that is her calling. I would there might be on the one hand the burden and exercise that we might be in the calling to which God has called us, and that secondly whatever we do, we might walk it out, not just as work, a job, but as a calling. “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.”

“That I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended.” But then secondly it speaks of the Christian life, gospel blessings. When the Lord calls you by His grace, when He lays hold on you, there are certain things He will lead you to lay hold of. There is a laying hold of salvation, a laying hold of eternal life, a laying hold of Christ. There are ten thousand things in the gospel to lay hold of: the various portions of divine

truth, the many sacred experiences, the beautiful texts of Scripture. Now there is so much in real religion that we have to apprehend by faith, that the Lord will lead us to lay hold of. Let me put it like this. The land of Canaan clearly belonged to the children of Israel by promise. It was theirs. But they had to go in and possess it step by step. And sometimes they had to fight for it. And God said, "Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you." When Joshua was coming to the end of his life, the Lord said, "Thou art old and stricken in years, and there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed."

So the apostle gives this testimony, and it is a very gracious testimony, a very humble testimony. He says, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended." He says, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect." The Apostle Paul did not think he had attained. He certainly did not think he knew all the answers. Now beware of people who think they have attained. Beware of people who think that they know. Beware of people who think that they have apprehended. I suppose not many people would say it with their lips, but a multitude behave as if it were so. Is there no land still to be possessed? Is there to be no growth in grace? Have you been led into every aspect of divine truth? Paul says, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended."

I must just emphasise this point. Immediately before this, Paul had been giving us one of the most gracious testimonies of salvation that any sinner saved by grace ever gave. Look at this, look how much he had attained, look how much he had apprehended. None of us can bear comparison with the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3. Look how far he had got in the Christian life. Look at his attainments. "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ." Now look how far the apostle had got. Look at his spiritual attainments. Yet he says, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended." It would be a wonderful mercy if there were more of this godliness and grace and humility that was found in the Apostle Paul. May you and I this morning possess it. May it be burned into our hearts by the Spirit of God, that we have not already attained, that we are not already perfect, that we have not yet apprehended. There are blessings in Christ

that none of us yet has attained. There are glories in His holy Word that none of us has yet seen. May we be established on this point, that we have not arrived, that we have not already attained, that we are not already perfect, whether you take the word perfect as meaning free from sin, as it sometimes does in Scripture, or being completely mature, the work finished, as it does in other cases in Scripture. But on neither of these counts are we perfect.

But the apostle follows with four important, vital words. He says, “But I follow after.” He does not claim that he knows everything, that he possess everything. He does not even claim any high attainment in divine things. But he is not satisfied with himself. He is completely satisfied with his God and Saviour, but he is not satisfied with himself. He is not satisfied with his spiritual attainments. He is not satisfied with his growth in grace. May there be an example to you and me here. “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” So we are reminded of Jabez’ prayer. Jabez prayed, “O that Thou wouldest bless me indeed!” That is a following after. “O that Thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast” – coast being used in the old-fashioned sense, meaning the boundary. He wanted his boundaries to be enlarged. Give me a blessing I have never had before. Give me a view of the Saviour I have never had before. Give me some precious word in Scripture I have never been led into before. “I follow after.” There is life there. There is more than life. There is liveliness there, when you find a sinner following after – the opposite of being settled on our lees. That is why sometimes the Lord will cut you and chastise you.

“‘Tis if need be, He reproves us,
Lest we settle on our lees.”

May there be this following after. “Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord.” “But I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but 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.”

“This one thing I do.” Paul here tells us the purpose of his life, the object, the end of his life. What does he live for? Now that is an

important question for each of us, a very close, searching question. What are we living for? What is the end of our life? What is the purpose of our life? Is it some earthly ambition, or is it just prosperity, wealth? Is it to do well? Is it the good of our family? What is the purpose of our life? Paul tells us what the purpose of his life was. “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.” Really this is a commentary on what he has just said: “I follow after.” He is telling us just what he meant, when he said, “I follow after.” It is this pressing on toward the mark. He then says what his purpose in life is. In another place he puts it like this: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” Paul says, That is what I live for, that is the purpose of my life. And he speaks very exclusively here. There is something very exclusive in real religion. “This one thing I do.” If there is an emphasis in Paul’s epistles, especially the latter chapters, it might be spoken of like this, singleness of mind, singleness of heart, singleness of intention. “This one thing I do.”

Of course, there are the *one things* of Scripture, aren’t there? “*One thing* have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after” – *one thing* – “that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in His temple.” “One thing have I desired.” “One thing I know.” The blind man, there were so many things he did not know. “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.” “One thing is needful,” and only one thing. Other things do not really matter. May it be well engraven on our hearts.

“This one thing I do.” There is something exclusive about it. This is the purpose, the aim, the end of Paul’s life. He says it should be so for every believer. “This one thing I do.” “I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but 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.” There is much land still to be possessed. “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended.” “Not as though I had already attained.” There is something exclusive here. “This one thing I do.” Of course, that does not mean that a person has to leave the world and enter a

monastery or nunnery. It does not mean everybody has to give up a secular calling. It does not mean a person has to be on his knees all day long. But it means that the Christian life must be lived to the honour and glory of God, and in a word it means this, that if your religion is real, Christ must always be first, first in everything, first in all things, first at all times, and everything else must come second. It means this, that you must go the second mile for Jesus' sake. There is not much second-mile religion today.

And of course, as Paul develops this, not just the aim of it, the purpose, not just the exclusiveness of it, he speaks so strongly of his holy zeal, his fervency, in the light of a never-ending eternity and the judgment day and possessing a never-dying soul. The world is very zealous – whether it is a man's garden, or going to a football match, or just making money – the world is very enthusiastic. Paul is not ashamed of his enthusiasm for the things of God. I want to speak advisedly. We have heard so much of false zeal, we have heard so much of blind zeal, we have heard so much of zeal without knowledge, that we seem to be coming to the point that there is not any zeal at all. The Apostle Paul had a holy, godly zeal for divine things. He had a gracious enthusiasm for them, for the honour and glory of God, for the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. And it is this, to be a follower. “But I follow after.” That does not mean making a lot of noise, or shouting, or being flamboyant. It is to be one of those humble, quiet, serious Christians. But Christ is everything to them, and the world nothing. Now may we seek to be Christians like that. “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after.” I am not what I should be, not what I would be, not what I long to be, not what I hope to be. But I would follow after.

“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.” This holy zeal, this godly enthusiasm, Paul speaks of it as reaching forth, reaching forth unto those things which are before. He tells us that he forgets those things which are behind. I do not want you to misunderstand this this morning, beloved friends. “Forgetting those things which are behind.” It does not mean we are to forget what we were by nature, where we were, lost, ruined, guilty, on the way to hell when the Lord apprehended us. God says, “Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of

Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.” It does not mean that a child of God has to forget what he was and where he was when mercy apprehended him. Also, it most certainly does not mean that we have to forget the Lord’s mercies. To do that is a sin. We must never

“Let God’s mercies lie
Forgotten in unthankfulness,
And without praises die.”

It does not mean that.

“Forgetting those things which are behind.” What does it mean? It means that past life, that life of the flesh, that life of carnality, that life of selfishness has to be behind your back for ever. You have to die to it. It is a new life now. Henceforth we should live to Him that died and rose again. Of course, Paul as he speaks of the Christian life as following on, and as reaching forward, as pressing on, he begins to compare the Christian life to a race. There are various comparisons of the Christian life: sometimes to a pilgrimage through the wilderness, sometimes to a fight, the fight of faith, a fight with sin and Satan, unbelief, carnality, self, the world; sometimes a spiritual voyage.

“They leave this world’s deceitful shore,
And leave it to return no more.”

Here, the Christian life is spoken of as the heavenly race.

“Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.” You see, the heavenly race is a pressing forward, a reaching forth. There is not much point in running in a race if you are not reaching forth to those things which are before, if you are not pressing forward. In this sense, in this context, when he says, “Forgetting those things which are behind,” in the analogy of the race he means this: you have not to keep turning round. Children at school, if they are running in a race, the little ones will often keep turning round to see what the others are doing behind. They are told to keep looking straight on. If they keep looking behind, they will not go so fast. That is what Paul means in the analogy here. You have not to keep turning round, either looking at what other people are doing, or especially looking back to the world and what the world is doing.

“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.” So you see how the urgency, the zeal comes in. “I press toward the mark.” You see how the one purpose comes in. “I press toward the mark.” You see how the exclusiveness comes in. “I press toward the mark.” This person running the race may have all kinds of things happening at home, troubles or joys. For the moment he has to leave those. There is only one thing for the moment that matters, and that is the pressing toward the mark.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the apostle again takes up this very beautiful theme, the heavenly race. He has just finished the worthies of faith in Hebrews 11. He begins Hebrews 12 like this. (Of course in the original there is no break, no chapter division.) He begins like this: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses.” They have run the race and reached the mark. “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” Let us run with patience. It is more like a marathon race than a sprint. It is not something which is over in a day. It is a lifetime. “Let us run with patience.” Patience in Scripture tends more to mean endurance. When we think about patience, we think of a person being very patient. “Ye have heard of the patience of Job,” says Scripture. Well, Job was not very patient. Rather it means, You have heard what Job endured. We still have it in everyday language: in hospital we speak about a “patient”; that is not to describe their spirit, that they are patient people. The point is this: enduring to the end, not dropping out, not turning back. “Let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”

And he tells us that we are to lay aside every weight and the sin that does so easily beset us. There is that mortifying the flesh, any besetting sin. You will not do well in the heavenly race unless you do. But it is this that comes close: “Let us lay aside every weight.” Some things are not sins. They are not wicked. But they are weights. That is, when you are running the heavenly race they do not help you, they are a hindrance. You have to lay them aside as well as the sins that so easily beset you. The man running the race wears as little as he can. If he is a business man, he will not carry a brief case. There is nothing wrong in carrying a brief case, but if he is running a race, he will leave it behind. “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily beset us, and

let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” And the blessed conclusion: “Looking unto Jesus.”

“Life with its path before us lies;
Christ is the way and Christ the prize.”

Christ in glory is the source of all your supplies, all your strength for the heavenly race. “Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus.”

“I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” That is heaven. That is the eternal prize, not of merit, but of grace; not of debt, but on the grounds of mercy. That prize that Moses sought and attained when he esteemed “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.” “So run, that ye may obtain.”

“I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” This pressing forward suggests this: it is not easy; there are difficulties; there are obstacles. But this pressing on, pressing through – “I press toward the mark.” And the secret of it? Well, the Song of Solomon hints at the heavenly race. But it joins a prayer: “Draw me, we will run after Thee.” We do not seem to make much headway in the race. “Not as though I had already attained.” We do not seem to go very fast. We do not seem to speed our way very well. But draw me, then I will run all right. Then I will make good headway. Then I will press toward the mark. The sweet drawings, the influences, the blessed constrainings of the love of Christ, that is the secret. “Draw me, we will run after Thee.”

“I need the influence of Thy grace
To speed me in my way,
Lest I should loiter in my race.”

“Draw me, we will run after Thee.” “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” They tell me that in these ancient races a man stood at the end. There was not a tape or a finishing post. A man stood at the end. It was the first one to reach that man who attained, who gained the prize. And beloved friends, this morning there is a Man in heaven. Like good Richard Dore: that Man whom I love and who I believe loves me. There is a Man in heaven, a glorious Man, a Man who once suffered, who died, now for ever exalted.

“This is the Man, the exalted Man,
Whom we, unseen, adore.”

And He is standing there at the end of the way. That is the mark to which we press. O may it be with our eyes fixed on Jesus, looking to Him, looking to Him alone, that we might one day attain, we might one day apprehend, and that it might be this, to see that glorious Man, and for Him to receive us and receive us for ever, and that our eyes may see the King in His beauty. “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”