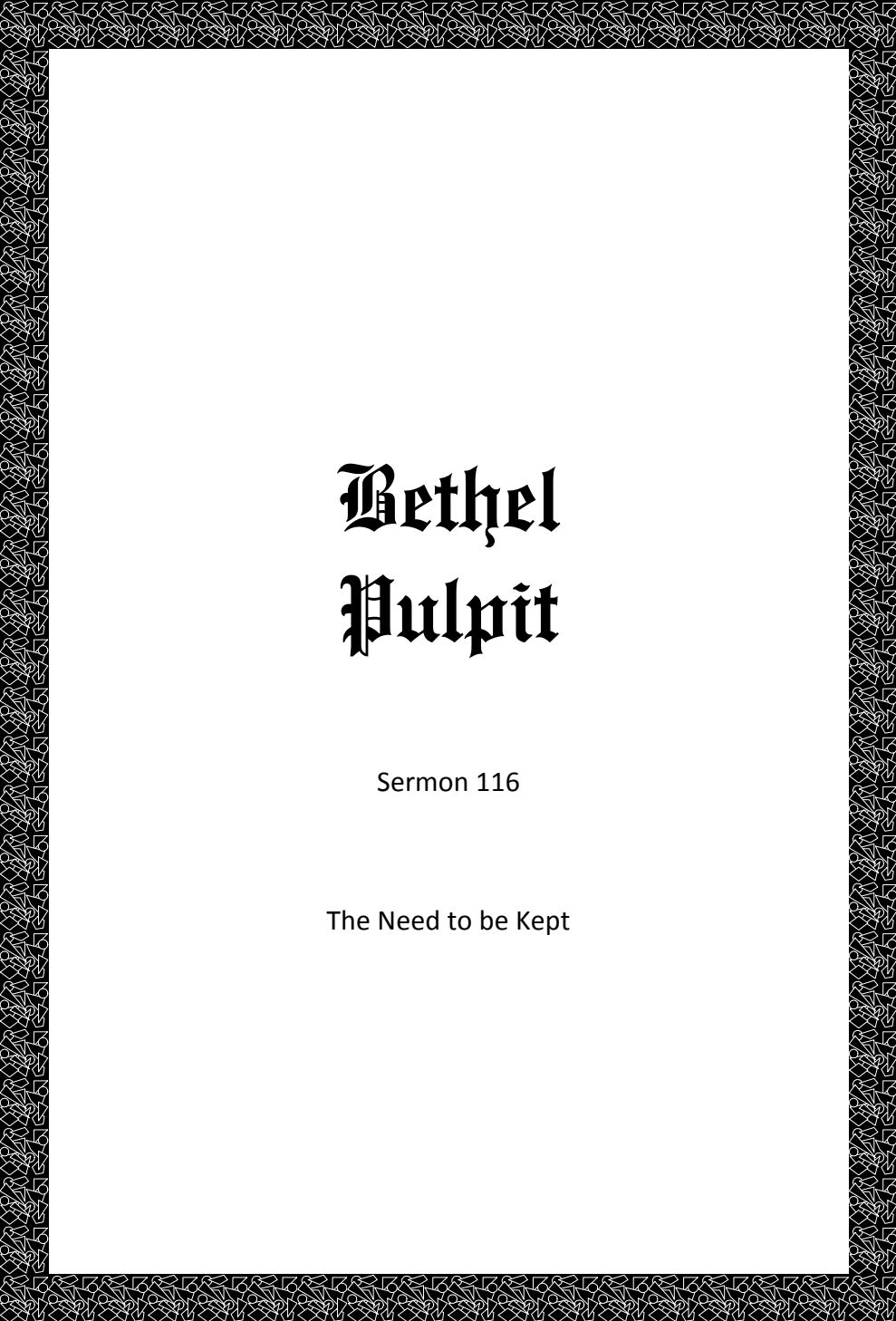




# Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 116

The Need to be Kept

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,  
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,  
on Lord's day morning, 12th February, 1995**

**Text:** *"Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not"*  
(*Psalms 17. 5*).

I want to take up today this exceedingly important point that has harassed God's people down the ages and which over the years has harassed us: this point of being kept. Because sure we are that we have no more power to keep ourselves than to save ourselves, and as David says in this verse, beloved friends, we have slippery feet. Every one of us has slippery feet. The most eminent saint has slippery feet.

Some of us especially look back to our early days, the days before we made an open profession, and O how that point cut us to the heart: what if I should profess the Lord's name? What if I should go on for many years and then at last be left to myself to fall and dishonour the name of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? O what a burden it was! And then when we had been enabled in love to profess the Lord's name, O the terrible fear of dishonouring our profession! How can I endure to the end? We love the truth of the eternal safety and security of the people of God, that not one of God's people can ever perish, that,

"Once in Him, in Him for ever;  
Thus the eternal covenant stands.  
None shall pluck thee  
From the Strength of Israel's hands."

It is a wonderful truth, a precious truth. Yet in one sense we felt we could not rest in that. I do not want you to misunderstand me. We could rest in it in the sense of it being divine truth and that all God's people are saved at last. But we could not rest in it in this sense: we looked at some of the saints in Scripture and how they were left to fall and dishonour their Saviour, and *they* were "once in Him, in Him for ever."

We looked at David, and the Holy Ghost Himself has said, "A man after His (God's) own heart." Yet left to himself, he fell and dishonoured the Lord and brought such reproach on the cause of God. Then we looked at Abraham, the father of the faithful, and how he, when left to himself,

fell. And he committed the same sin a second time. We thought of Isaac following in the footsteps of his father, and Jacob in so many different ways. So we might go on. Samson is recorded amongst the worthies of Hebrews 11. He was “once in Him, in Him for ever,” yet Samson, when left to his own spirit, was a disgrace to Israel and Israel’s God. We are told he was the strongest man who ever lived, yet against the power of sin and Satan he was weak. What about when we come to the New Testament and look on someone like Peter? If ever a person loved the Lord Jesus, it was Peter. If ever a person was strong in faith, it was Peter. Yet we see this godly man Peter, this apostle Peter, not only falling, but (who would have thought it?) denying His Lord and Master with oaths and curses. These are like solemn beacon lights in Scripture. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.”

With some of us in our early days it used to work like this: if David could not stand, what hope is there for me? If Peter could not stand, what hope is there for me? They were so eminent in godliness and grace. I am so weak. I have so little grace. Sin, Satan, the world are so strong. What hope is there for me? What if in some unguarded moment I should fall? What if in some unguarded moment I should deny my Lord and Master? This was the point that harassed William Gadsby all the days of his life. Of course, Gadsby was blessed with such godliness and graciousness that even his enemies admired him. But all the days of his life up to his dying day he lived with that fear: what if just for a moment or two I should be left to myself and fall, and dishonour my Saviour and my profession and my preaching? Beloved friends, these are real things, important things. Perhaps they are not often spoken about. Perhaps they are not spoken about as often as they should be. But this realisation of our liability to fall, this realisation that we have no power to keep ourselves, and as David puts it here, this solemn realisation that we have slippery feet.

“Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” Now beloved friends, the Word of God is not silent on this very solemn subject: the liability of even the most eminent child of God to fall into open sin. The Word of God is not silent on the point. The Word of God constantly warns about it. But the Word of God contains much gracious teaching and much gracious exhortation to show a believer how he can live, how he can walk, how he can behave, so that he does not fall. Surely you are not going to call this legality; you are not going to call this creature

strength. Why, it is the very opposite! But the Word of God is full of gracious, divine teaching on this important subject, and it *is* an important subject. Some of us have trembled concerning it.

Let me with the Lord's help say a few things to you this morning which I hope will be for your help and for your profit and for your edification. I hope there is no-one here in such a spirit of self-righteousness and pride that you say, These things do not belong to me; that you say, I am not in any danger. Well, if you are, may the Lord in mercy undeceive you. Some of us have had this burnt into our hearts:

“If ever it could come to pass,  
That sheep of Christ might fall away,  
My fickle, feeble soul, alas!  
Would fall a thousand times a day.”

Mind you, the Lord's people are safe, eternally secure, to all eternity, every one of them, a David and a Peter. But it is the daily life of the believer. It is the walking it out. It is, as our late deacon Mr. Arthur Pearce used to say so often, “How can I live until I die?”

Well then, just a few things that the Lord in love and mercy has said to you and me for our encouragement if this burden is ours, this fear of being left to dishonour the Saviour, this fear of being left to fall. The first thing of all is *prayer*, prayer to the Lord, prayer to Him that He might uphold us. This prayer we have here: “Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” A prayer that the Lord in His love and mercy will hold us up. It is a wonderful thing to be upheld, isn't it? A wonderful thing if we come to the end of a day, the end of a year, and we can say, *Upheld*. A wonderful thing if we can come to the end of a day, the end of a year, and we can say, *Kept*. You remember the well-known story of the two ministers who passed each other on the escalator at New Street Station, Birmingham, and these two ministers recognised each other as they passed. I am almost certain one was Mr. Hadley and one was Mr. Brooker, and they had only time for a passing word, and one called to the other, “How are you?” And the other called back, “Kept.” But that one word had such an effect on the other minister that it abode with him all the days of his life. “How are you?” “Kept.”

O but this need for prayer, real prayer, fervent prayer, urgent prayer, prayer to be kept, prayer to be upheld. “Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” Or as the psalmist puts it in another place, “Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.” And really the meaning of it is this: and I only shall be safe if Thou dost hold me up. “Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.” “Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” Lord, I have got slippery feet. I cannot stop them from slipping, from sliding, but do hold me up that my footsteps slip not. Now may we be much in prayer for this. May the truth sink deep into our hearts, our need of being kept, our need of being upheld, and this prayer forced out of our very hearts by the Spirit of God: “Hold up my goings in Thy paths.”

But on this point, the importance of prayer, there is a somewhat different aspect. That is, not just the particular prayer morning by morning or during the day, (“Lord, keep me, Lord, hold me up”), but *the life of prayer*. Do not neglect the secret place. Do not neglect communion with the Lord. Be very, very careful if prayer begins to languish. Be very, very careful if the secret place, the quiet time, is disappearing, slipping out of your life. Let us be abundantly clear: backsliding, falling, does not begin openly. It always begins in secret. It is when secret prayer is restrained. It is when we sink into carnality and deadness and darkness and indifference, when we are swallowed up with other things, perhaps even lawful things, when the thorns and the briars begin to choke the growth. There is not much going on between our souls and God. There is not any nearness to the Saviour. There is not the burden, the exercise, the meditation, the prayer, the reading of God’s Word. It is then we are in danger.

Do you see the point, beloved friends? It is not just the particular prayer, the definite prayer, “Lord, keep me; Lord uphold me.” It is not just that. It is our prayer life. If that begins to languish, if that begins to fail, then you and I are in danger. Not only have we slippery feet, but we are on slippery ground, and how can we stand when we have so many foes, so many enemies, so many temptations? “Restraining prayer, we cease to fight; prayer makes the Christian’s armour bright.” Where there is no prayer, the Christian’s armour become rusty and is no match for sin, Satan and the world. So this is a foundation: the need to be led by the Spirit in much prayer, dependence on the Lord, prayer that He will hold us up, especially the life of secret prayer!

“Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” Now I want to come to a second thing in this burden, this terrible concern lest you and I should be left to deny our Lord and Master, lest we should be left to fall, lest we should be left to dishonour Him. It is a very simple point, but it is one of the hardest points for us ever to believe, and that is *to realise how weak we are*.

“O watch against trusting to your native strength;  
Behold Peter boasting, but o’ercome at length.”

Let us be clear, we all have the spirit of Peter’s self-righteousness in our hearts. The Lord Jesus said to Peter, “Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny Me thrice.” And Peter said, “Who, me? Not me, Lord.” We all have that spirit in us. “Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee.” The world perhaps, someone else, but not me, Lord. We do need to have this self-righteous spirit, this proud spirit, this independent spirit, sifted out of us, burnt out of us. O may the Lord in love and mercy teach you and me just how weak, just how helpless we are. What is the best of men when left to himself?

The times I have gone back to that remarkable happening in the days of the martyrs. As I remember it, there were two eminent preachers, preachers of the truth; one was called Pendleton; one was called Saunders. It became apparent that very soon persecution and martyrdom would come to the district and these two ministers of the truth used to discuss it together. Poor Lawrence Saunders used to tremble day by day. He said, “I am so weak; I am such a poor Christian. I am sure if my religion were put to the test, I should dishonour my Lord and Master.” The other minister, Pendleton, used to say, “Where is your faith? Do you not believe what the Word of God teaches? Where is your trust in the Saviour? If persecution comes here, I would not think of denying truth.” You can go to visit the memorial in Coventry to the martyr, Lawrence Saunders, who refusing deliverance was burnt to ashes. There is no memorial to Pendleton. When persecution came, he apostatised to save his own life. I have often gone back to that. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” May the Lord in love and mercy teach us our utter weakness and helplessness that we might be brought in complete dependence on the Saviour for our preservation. O that beautiful word which over the years I have found so precious: “Preserved in Jesus.” O that we might prove it.

“The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.”

“Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” My slippery footsteps, my slippery feet. Now another thing is this: not only do we need to realise our terrible weakness, but *may the Lord show us if we have some particular weakness*. Often it is the opposite. We do find in Scripture and in history that often people have fallen on the point where they thought they were strong. But if we have some particular weakness. I never had noticed this, but one of the Puritans comments that he wonders if David felt he had a weakness concerning telling lies. Now I had never noticed this, but David over and over again in his prayers begs the Lord to keep his lips, to keep him in the truth, to keep him from lying, to keep him from saying things which are wrong. Well, be that as it may, may the Lord show us where our special weakness is, because that is the place where Satan will tempt you, that is the place where Satan will tempt me. If there is a man who does not like the taste of strong drink, Satan will not tempt that man to get drunk. But Satan knows where your weakness and mine is. Satan is a skilful tempter. He has been examining human nature since before Adam fell and he knows the human heart. He goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Sometimes he appears as an angel of light, and he knows just how weak you are and where your weakness is; and that is the place where he will tempt you. May the Lord teach you and me not only how weak we are, but may He teach us those special places of weakness. In medieval warfare, if there was a part of the city and the walls there were slightly broken or weak, that was the place they specially needed to take notice of, because that was where the enemy would try to break through, try to knock the walls down.

“Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” Now there is another thing, and that is *watchfulness*. There is so much about it in Scripture. “Let us watch and be sober.” “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.” There are so many of these exhortations to us to watch. O may the Lord give us a watchful spirit, because we do not have it by nature. In one place the psalmist says, “I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.” Have you ever seen a little sparrow? What does it watch for? It watches for crumbs. What else is it watching for? It is watching for danger. If a cat appears in the garden, you cannot see the sparrows. They have

disappeared from the garden. The psalmist says, “I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top” – watching for danger, for the first sign of danger.

And beloved friends, how do you deal with the first sign of danger? “May I from every sin, as from a serpent fly.” How do you deal with the approach of danger? “Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” But how do you deal with the approach of danger? Well, to refer to the Puritan writers again, they asked, How would you deal with a spark which flew out of the fire on to your carpet? They said, Always deal with the approaches of evil, the temptations of Satan like that. In those days of open fires when they used to burn logs, sparks were often flying out. How do you deal with them? Do you sit and watch them and admire them? No; you immediately put your foot on them and stamp them out. If a few came out in the evening, you would do the same. You would not say, I have done it once. The Puritans were masters not just of theology, but in understanding the life of faith and the temptations of Satan. They said, Always deal with them as with sparks of fire. Put them out immediately, otherwise your house will be in a blaze.

That is what David did not do when he went on to the house top and watched Bathsheba washing. That is what Lot did not do. In the first Psalm, “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.” That is the downward path to a fall. First of all, you walk in that way; then you stand in it; then you sit in it. Of course, the eminent example of it is Lot. What did he do? Well, he was not blessed with a watchful spirit. He saw the land of Sodom and Gomorrah that it was good. It appealed to self and the flesh. He chose Sodom and Gomorrah. I wonder if Lot thought he was going to convert Sodom and Gomorrah. He escaped alone, apart from his daughters, who had learnt the evil ways of Sodom and Gomorrah, and he lost his own wife, turned into a pillar of salt. He lost all his belongings down there. Peter clearly tells us in his epistle, “That righteous man.” But he went to Sodom and walked in the counsel of the ungodly, and then he stood in the way of sinners, and finally he sat in their seat.

O may the Lord give you and me that watchful spirit. We need to watch our slippery paths and we need to watch our slippery feet. “Ponder the path of thy feet.” And we need to *watch the enemy*. O we need to

realise that we have an enemy, Satan; we have an enemy, unbelief; we have an enemy, indwelling sin; we have an enemy, the world; and these things will never be our friends, whatever pleasing appearance they put on. We need to watch our enemy. Some of you may say, It is to keep our eyes on Jesus fixed. Yes, it is. But we need to watch our enemy.

In America in the last century amid all the lawlessness of the wild west as the frontier daily pressed further and further toward the Pacific, there was a terrible lot of lawlessness as they were there speculating for land. They all carried guns in their holster by their hip. Now if two people met, they kept their eye on the other man's holster. They never took their eye away from that. They were ready for the first movement of his hand towards his holster to draw his pistol. They were ready for it. Keep your eye on danger. Keep your eye on Satan. Seek to "be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain." May the Lord deliver us from this slothful, slumbering spirit. The Lord make us watchful, watching against the beginning of temptation, watching our path, watching our feet, watching our enemy.

"Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not." Now I want to come to another thing and it is very important, and actually David mentions it here in the context. He says, "I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer." What does he mean? He means, I have learnt this lesson, and that is to *keep away from the place of temptation*, from the occasion of evil. I have learnt to keep away from that. "I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer." Never play with sin. Never play with temptation. Never go to that doubtful place or in that doubtful company or attempt that doubtful thing. "I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer." The Lord give us each grace to keep ourselves from the paths of the destroyer. And to show that David was not doing it in his own strength, he says, "I have kept me," but "Lord, hold me up."

Beware of idleness. It was when David was idle that he fell. There is a lot of good divinity in Dr. Watts's well-known couplet which years ago many children in England had to learn by heart, in Dr. Watts's *Moral and Spiritual Songs*. "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do." Beloved friends, he still does. We read in Samuel that the army went forth in battle toward the enemy, but David remained at home. He was not in his place at the head of the army. He was choosing a life of

slothfulness and pleasure and ease. You say, There was not anything wrong in having a sleep, a rest, on the house top, was there? Yes, there was, if he should have been doing something different. Have you read the case of Meroz in Judges 5? “Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof.” What had Meroz done wrong? Absolutely nothing. Well, why did they get the most bitter curse of anyone in the old testament? Because there was something Meroz should have been doing and they were not, and the Lord cursed them for it. They should have been going out into battle on the Lord’s side, but they chose ease and comfort and pleasure and remained at home. “Curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.” O beware of an idle spirit. Beware of slothfulness. Beware of carelessness. For I say it again, “Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do.” Avoid the place of sin; avoid the very appearance of evil.

“Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.” Finally, and most important of all, in a word it is this: “*Looking unto Jesus.*” If you have this burden, this concern, about honourably walking out your profession, this burden about being brought safely through, this burden about not being left to dishonour your Lord and Saviour, this burden about your dreadful weakness and helplessness and the power of sin and Satan, this burden of when temptation comes, this burden lest when left to yourself you might fall – may you keep your eyes on Jesus fixed.

“Looking unto Jesus.” Looking unto Jesus like this: if only we remember what in love and mercy He did when He went to Calvary to bleed and die and make atonement for sin, how can we dishonour His name? O “keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!” – from sinning against this wonderful, loving Saviour, from dishonouring His name. That is what Berridge means when he says, “Look on Him, my soul, and gaze on His smart; His cries will control the lusts of thy heart.” In other words in the hour of temptation to look on an agonising Saviour, to hear Him say, “All this I did for thee,” then sin will be crucified. You will abhor the sin which nailed the Saviour there.

“Hold up my goings.” “Looking unto Jesus.” Looking to His example, “who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.” But

above all looking unto Jesus for His help, for supplies of grace, for strength to uphold you, for His divine enablings. Looking unto Jesus: nothing in self, everything in Him. Yourself so weak and sinful, but looking unto Jesus; in your emptiness looking to His fulness. Grace, divine strength, help in time of need, everything you lack, everything He has to give. O it is this looking unto Jesus.

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest.” We are great sinners. Our needs are very great. Our helplessness is great. But “seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens,” – He has triumphed; He is victorious – “Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” That sweet uniting together of the Lord Jesus with a poor sinner in his profession, his little profession. We have to hold it fast. How can he hold it fast? Ah, says the apostle, there is a way. “We have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.” He loves us; He looks upon us; He sees us, our needs, our helplessness; He sympathises. And O the power and O the grace and O the love and O the ability! He is able. Do you believe it? Hold it fast. He “is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.”

“Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.”