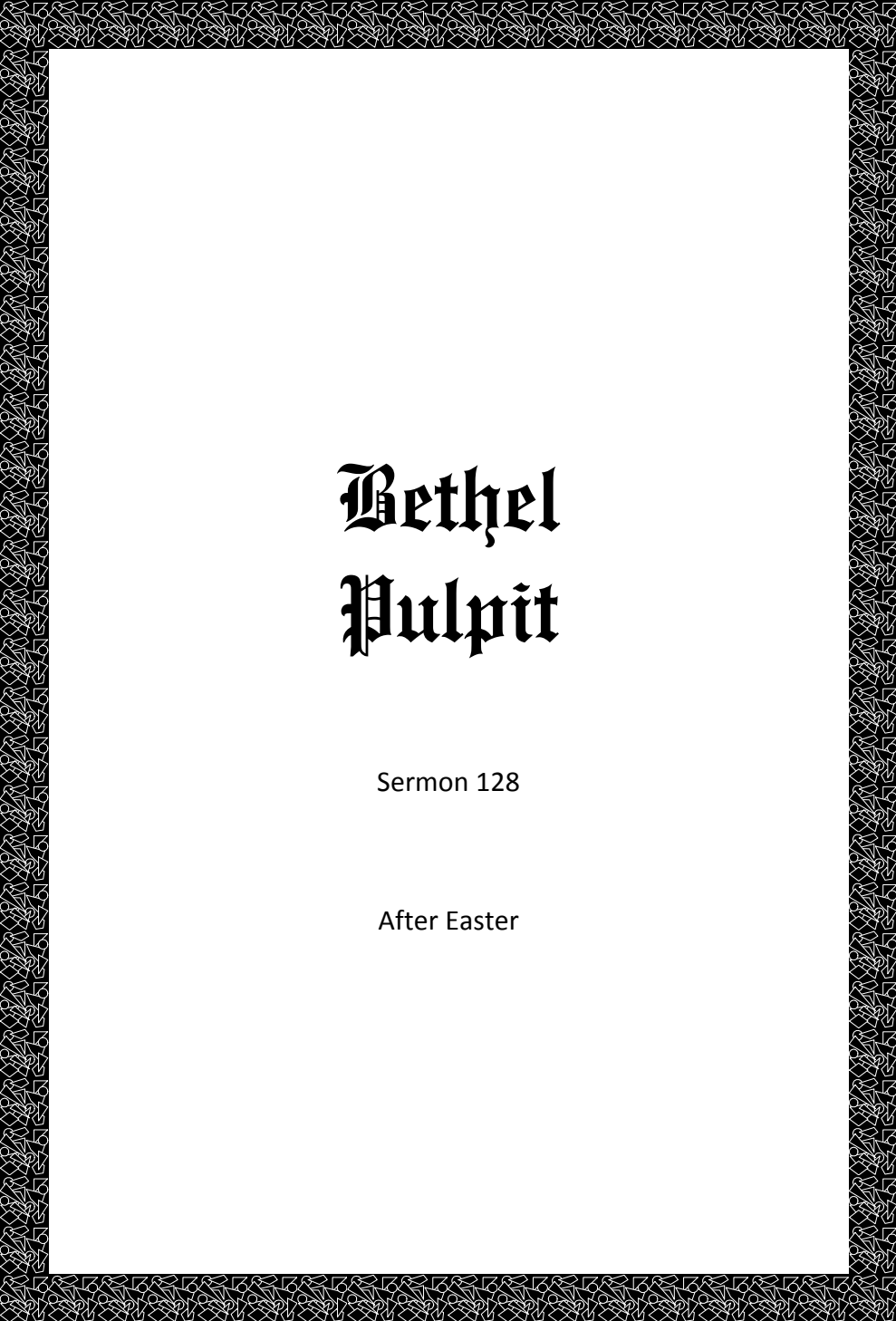




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 128

After Easter

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 23rd April, 1995**

Text: *"After Easter" (Acts 12. 4).*

You all realize this is not my usual way of taking a text, but these words have been very much with me. I have heard these words mentioned by people so often – people saying what they are going to do “after Easter,” or what is going to take place “after Easter,” or leaving something until “after Easter,” or now it *is* “after Easter,” now Easter has gone. I do not think I have heard any scriptural words spoken more in recent days, and many of you I have heard mention these words and probably you had not the slightest idea when you used them they were found in the Word of God.

Well, what a subject: “After Easter”! When you look at this chapter (about Herod intending to kill Peter) – all the things it was thought would happen “after Easter,” but they did not happen “after Easter.” Different things happened “after Easter.” Other things happened “after Easter.” Beloved friends, one thing is clear: God had the last word, not Herod, not wicked men. Whatever people were going to do, or not going to do, or planning to do, or intending to do, God had the last word. And He will with you, and He will with me. Of course, over the years, you have often heard me refer to this word, “After Easter.” I remember once some years ago, I did speak from this word at the Easter Monday services at Leatherhead, just these two words, “After Easter.” There was a lady there that day who went home after the evening service and died. That was a solemn “after Easter” to the congregation at Leatherhead.

Well, beloved friends, last week we were thinking about Easter, the glorious resurrection of the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, from the dead: “Him hath God exalted as a Prince and a Saviour.” But now, with each of us, once again Easter has gone. It is “after Easter.” Easter has passed. Easter has gone for another year. We are each reminded how rapidly our little lives are speeding away as year after year swiftly passes. One Easter comes and goes, and so time hastens on. “We spend our years as a tale that is told.” I do not know how you feel, beloved friends, after Easter this year. I wonder if there are some of you sad, disappointed. You

say, Another Easter has gone and I still have not found Him whom my soul loveth. I still have not been blessed with a sweet, personal assurance of my interest in His death and resurrection. Well, may you still be able to wait on, to pray on, for mercy will spring up at last.

I wonder now that it is “after Easter” if any of you girls and boys, any of you young people, were affected by it for the first time, affected by the thought of that cruel death that Jesus died, and the reason: to make an atonement for sin; or affected by His gracious power in the resurrection. I wonder if any of you for the first time had to ask that question, Was all this done for me? Because if it was not done for us, we must perish eternally. Perhaps some of you this year for the first time are seeking an interest in the death and resurrection of the Saviour. I hope that as Easter has passed once again, one or two of you have been blessed with the sweet assurance of your interest in the love of the dying Saviour, the rising Saviour, the ever-living Saviour. Well, one thing is very clear, that although Easter has passed, although Easter has gone now for another year, it does not make the slightest difference to the glorious truth of the resurrection. “The Lord is risen indeed.” And the power of His resurrection is eternally the same, year by year, month by month, day by day. “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection.” Now these are real things.

“After Easter.” Well then, Herod, this wicked, cruel, ungodly Herod, was intending “after Easter” to put Simon Peter to death. He already had Simon Peter in prison, and he was intending “after Easter” to bring him forth and to have him put to death, just like James had been put to death. When “after Easter” came, it was not Peter who was dead; it was Herod. There are some wonderful scriptures. “Upon this Rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgement thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord.” What a different “after Easter” it was from that which Herod had thought, and that which he had planned, that which he intended! He thought he would have Peter in the grave, but it was Herod himself who was in the grave. The Lord will have the last word. The Lord is in control.

Just a word to you young ones. This is the third Herod we come across in the Bible. Do not mix them up. The first Herod was the one who

spoke to the wise men and who slew all those little children round Bethlehem. The second Herod was one of his sons. He is the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist. This is the third Herod, the nephew of the second; the one who killed James the brother of John with the sword and intended to do the same with Peter.

But the Lord will have the last word whether it is Herod or whether it is Satan. You think of the similarity with Haman in the book of Esther. All the things he was intending to do: building that great gallows and Mordecai was going to hang on it. It was Haman who hung on his own gallows. And Satan has erected a great gallows on which he intends to hang many of God's people, but he will not. Satan will hang on his own gallows at last.

"Intending after Easter." And his plans and his purposes overthrown. It is a solemn thing when the Lord says "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: and it shall be no more." We find a great day in Herod's life. We find Herod arrayed in royal apparel, sitting upon a throne, making a wonderful speech, and the people all shouting, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." And immediately the hand of the Lord smote him. God will have the last word. "He was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." O the contrast between Herod in royal apparel sitting upon his throne and the people shouting, "It is the voice of a god," and immediately afterwards, Herod being eaten of worms and giving up the ghost!

Well, *that* is Herod. *This* is you and me. Perhaps many of you in the earlier part of this year were intending to do various things "after Easter," or planning to do various things "after Easter." I hope you prayed about them. I hope you committed them to the Lord. God was not in all Herod's thoughts. I hope God was in your thoughts. It may be that these things you plan to do "after Easter," you will not do. It may be there are different purposes God has for you "after Easter." O be very, very careful concerning saying what you *will* do, or what you *will not* do tomorrow, next week, in the unknown way, or "after Easter." Herod intended to do these things; he never did them. And you and I intend to do things. May we always be blessed with grace to pray our way along, to commit our way to the Lord.

Looking at this, that passage in James seems so applicable: “Go to now, ye that say, today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain. Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow.” I think I only once preached from this text. It was when I lived in Haslingden. On the last day of the old year, New Year’s eve, there was a man who attended chapel; a friend was at their house for tea, and at night he said, “I will just take you to the bus stop and see you safely on the bus.” Walking home, he was hit by a car on the zebra crossing at the bottom of the street where I lived, and a day or two later, died. “Ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” You children and young people, you have seen a vapour – a kettle boiling, steam coming from it, but you cannot catch hold of the steam. It is there, and a moment later it is gone for ever. “What is your life? It is even a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that *ye ought to say*, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

There is a loving rebuke here. “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” “If the Lord will, we shall live.” If it is not His will, we shall not even be alive. “If the Lord will, we shall ... do this, or that.” So often in your plans, you will be thinking you will do “this,” and the Lord has appointed you will do “that,” or you are planning to do “that” and it is the Lord’s will that you should do “this.” “For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

“Intending after Easter.” Now there is another side to it completely. Sometimes there are things we are intending to do and they are good things, and they are right things. Yet when “after Easter” comes, we do not do them, because we forget, or we are negligent. “Intending after Easter.” It may be there is someone here made a vow to the Lord what you would do “after Easter.” Well, it is better not to vow than to vow to the Lord and fail to pay that vow. “I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all His people.” It may be that some of you under the influence of grace have made a resolution “after Easter” and then it is

never fulfilled. Now if the Lord has caused you to promise to do something “after Easter,” then make sure you do it.

I remember in the very early years of my pastorate here going to visit two people, and I can speak freely because they are not here this morning. When I went in they handed an envelope to me and said, “There is your money.” I said, “I do not quite understand what you mean.” “Well,” they said, “just about a year ago we had a legacy, and we both said to each other, we should give something to our Pastor, and we decided we would. The year has passed and we have never done it. But this morning in our Bible reading, we came to these words: ‘For this is expedient for you, who have begun before, not only to do, but also to be forward a year ago. Now therefore perform the doing of it.’” It is a remarkable word, and it was remarkable that that very morning, after they read that reading, I went round to their home. There is a point, a principle here. If the Lord sweetly constrains you to do something, to walk in a certain pathway, to write a letter, to visit some person “after Easter,” be sure you walk out the purpose the Lord laid in your heart.

“After Easter.” Well, that is Herod. Now then, Peter. He was full of fear what was going to happen to him “after Easter.” Really, there was certain death staring him in the face. There was not any possibility of any escape. He was held in prison and delivered to four quaternions of soldiers. You know what this means. There were sixteen soldiers altogether guarding Peter, four at a time, and he was chained to two of them, and the other two with their swords used to march round so no-one could come near. There were four of these quaternions, so after six hours, one quaternion would be relieved, and so it went on through day and night. If ever a man was securely guarded, it was Peter. If ever there was a man and there was no possibility of escape, it was Peter. Peter knew what was going to happen to him “after Easter.” He knew he was going to endure a martyr’s death. He knew Herod would show no mercy. He knew there was no possibility of escape. But when “after Easter” came, the Lord was better to him than all his fears. “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations.” The thing you fear, you cannot see any possibility of escape, but when “after Easter” comes, the Lord will have the last word. God is in control, God is in charge, not Herod, not Satan. O the impossibility of the case! But O what an easy thing it was with God to

send an angel and to break his chains and to open the door of the prison and to set him free!

I will not say any more about Peter “after Easter.” But Herod, Peter – what about the church, the church of God? They were in trouble, because if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. They were in trouble. This beloved Peter – and he must have been a most lovable man despite all his sins and faults; the church loved him and he was such an eminent man, such a godly man, such an able man – they were going to lose him. The thing was sure. It was certain. “After Easter.” There was a royal decree, and he was going to be killed. Then you have one of those very wonderful words of the New Testament: “But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” Perhaps this is a rebuke to us as a church and congregation. We have so many things, perhaps, and we think they are impossible. I mean things which are going to happen “after Easter” in our nation, or things which are happening “after Easter” in our churches, or things “after Easter” in our own congregation. “But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

“Wrestling prayer can wonders do;
Bring relief in deepest straits!
Prayer can force a passage through
Iron bars and brazen gates.”

That was literally fulfilled “after Easter” in Acts 12. “Prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” The case was impossible, but they still prayed, and their prayers were very simple. They were asking God to do some definite thing. The Spirit of God was with them, leading them, enabling them to pray for it. As we sang just now, “The force of their united cries no power can long withstand.” We had it at the prayer meeting recently: “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing.” The unity of the church of God in prayer. They were all one in this. If only we are enabled at our prayer meetings to pray and plead and wrestle for those things in which we are all one, for, “The force of their united cries no power can long withstand.”

“But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” I think some margins put it like this: “Instant and earnest prayer.” Now may the Lord bless us with this, personally, in our homes, in secret, at the prayer meetings – not half-hearted, formal prayer, but instant and

earnest prayer. May the Lord bless us with this spirit of prayer. “After Easter.” “I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.” Now let us be clear. In answer to the prayers, the united prayers, the prayers without ceasing, the instant and earnest prayers of the church of God, God performed a miracle. Let us be clear, this is a miracle, sending this angel from heaven, breaking Peter’s chains, delivering him from the soldiers to whom he was bound and the others who were watching over him, bringing him out, setting him free. It was a miracle, yet the Lord did it in answer to their prayers. Do you believe the Lord can still do impossible things? Do you ever hear Him saying, “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for Me?”? What of the dear souls in our congregation who are held fast in darkness and bondage? If the Son shall make them free, they shall be free indeed. May that earnest prayer be made for their liberty. What about those parents who look at younger ones, and cannot see any sign of godliness or grace? Do you believe the Lord can set them free?

“Prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” There are some interesting things “after Easter” when Peter was delivered. “When Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me.” O the blessed ability of the Lord to deliver! “Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.”

“Then let our humble faith address
His mercy and His power;
We shall obtain delivering grace,
We shall obtain delivering grace,
In the distressing hour.”

“Is thy God ... able to deliver thee?” “Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod.” The hand of Herod was a royal hand, a mighty hand, but it was not almighty. “The Lord ... hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.”

“And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John.” He knew where he would find God’s people; he knew where they would be. “Where many were gathered together praying.” They were still praying. It must have been going on some days.

They still had not got the answer, but they did not give up. “Prayer was made without ceasing.” So often we pray and we do not receive the answers, and we give up, but they did not. They were still continuing, still praying, and many of them were gathered together praying.

Of course, when Rhoda ran to tell them Peter was at the door, they did not believe it. That is just like us, isn’t it? We pray, we wrestle for something, and then when it comes, we can hardly believe it is true. We begin to doubt it. They were praying earnestly for Peter’s release and when Rhoda went and said it was Peter, “they said unto her, Thou art mad.” This is this godly church, this praying church. They said, “Thou art mad.” It is like that well-known prayer meeting in one of our chapels years ago when there had been a terrible period of drought. It was a farming district, and the farmers were facing disaster. They had a special prayer meeting. There had not been a sign of rain for weeks. Didn’t they smile at the old lady who came carrying her umbrella! Do we really believe what we do believe? I understand that before the prayer meeting was ended the dear old lady needed her umbrella, because the heavens broke and the rain poured down. O but how unbelieving we are! How we need that exhortation, “O thou of little faith”!

O but “after Easter” – this blessed church, favoured by God, this blessed church with answers to its prayers, this blessed church with Peter restored to them. Now there is just one other “after Easter.” Herod, Peter, the church – and then at the end of it, “But the Word of God grew and multiplied.” There are a few very interesting *buts* in this chapter. “*But* prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” “*But* Peter continued knocking.” There are a few interesting *buts*. And here, “*But* the Word of God grew and multiplied.” Whatever takes place, whatever does not take place, God’s work will go on. His purposes in judgment and in mercy will be fulfilled.

“His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.”

You think of all Herod’s plans and his intentions and what wicked people thought “after Easter” and what they decided “after Easter.” But this is what God determined “after Easter,” that His own work would go on, and

it still will, after this Easter, and after every Easter, down to the end of time.

“But the Word of God grew and multiplied.” “The Word of the Lord endureth for ever.” That can never be destroyed; that can never be in the grave. But you say, How can God’s Word grow? How can it be multiplied? You turn to the last page of the Bible, and most solemn things are pronounced about anyone who adds to the words of this Book. How can it grow and be multiplied? First of all, in the hearts of those where the Word has never had any effect before, as one here and another there is brought under the power of God’s Word, and effectually called by His grace. “The Word of God grew and multiplied.” If you want a commentary on this, start at the beginning of the next chapter, and read to the end of the Acts of the Apostles. You will see there the Word of God growing and being multiplied, and this wicked king with all his plans and intentions in the grave.

Secondly, in the hearts of God’s people, as those who have known the Word and love it are brought to know more and more of it, led into more parts of it, more parts of their life being brought under the influence of it. So “the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions.” This is what Jabez meant when he said, “Oh that Thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast!” Lead me into some part of Thy Word I have never been led into before. As Mr. Gosden used to say, How big is your Bible? You know what he meant. We all have the same Bible in our hands, in our pews, in our homes, but how much of it have we got locked up in our heart? “But the Word of God grew and multiplied.”

Beloved friends, “after Easter.” May you be able to lay these things to heart. “After Easter” – Herod, Peter, the church, the Word of God and His purposes, and “after Easter” – you and me.