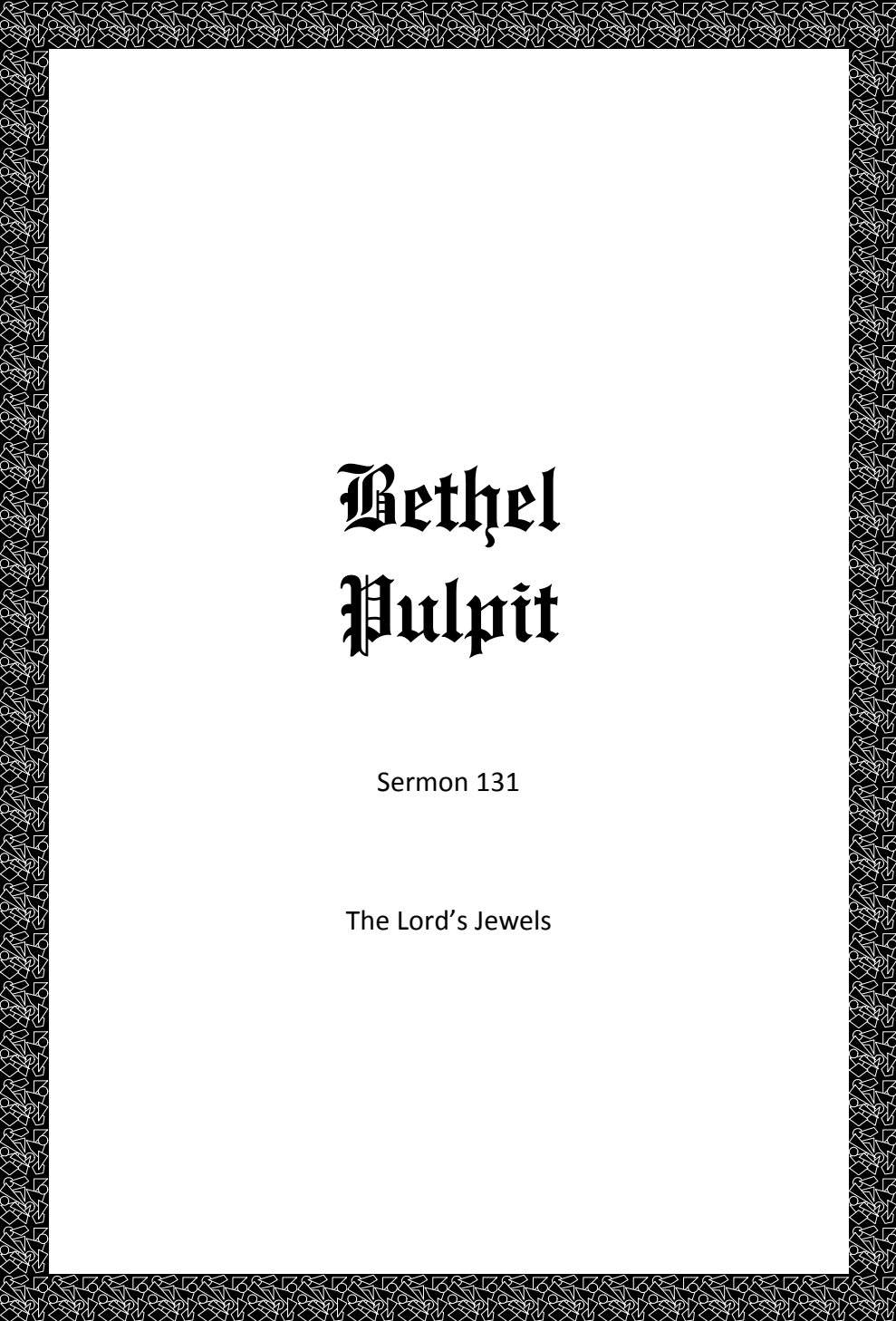




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 131

The Lord's Jewels

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 26th May, 1996**

Text: *“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him” (Malachi 3. 16, 17.).*

Whenever I read these closing chapters of the Old Testament, there seems to be such a sense of darkness and gloom and depression over everything. I mean, these third and fourth chapters of Malachi, they are very dark, very depressing, very gloomy. The Old Testament begins with a beautiful garden, but it ends with a curse. You read especially of such dreadful things in the religion of the day. And then, amidst it all, you suddenly stumble across this gleam of divine light from heaven. “Then” – *then* – “they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it.” *Then*, when things were so dark, when the Lord was about to withdraw the outward signs of His presence, when the canon of the Old Testament Scripture was going to be closed, when no more of the Word of God was going to appear for about four hundred years, “*Then* they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.” And the point is this, beloved friends, that in all ages God has His own people. In the days of Elijah, when he thought that he only was left, the Lord told him of those seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed their knee to Baal. And right through those dark ages of medieval times there were the Lord's hidden ones here and there, like a Bernard of Clairvaux hidden away in a monastery in France. God will always have His people, even in the darkest of times.

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.” There are so many things in our day which very much resemble the days of Malachi. Surely I do not need to tell you the things that are happening in England only this year, the things that are reported daily in the papers, the murders, the dreadful happenings. This is a day like the day of Malachi, a day of darkness. “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to

another.” The Lord says to His dear people today in this dark and gloomy day, “Ye are My witnesses.” People sometimes say, You have to be witnesses, you have to witness. If you are a child of God, you *are* a witness. It is not that you have to be one or you should be one. By the way you act, the way you behave, the way you do not behave, the way you dress, the places you go, the things you do, “Ye *are* My witnesses.” If you profess the name of Christ, “Ye are My witnesses,” and it is either a good witness or a bad witness. But, “Ye are My witnesses.” You cannot escape it. The sad, solemn thing is that so often we are poor witnesses, our witness is not gracious, our witness does not honour and glorify Christ. But the word still stands, “Ye are My witnesses.”

Do not misunderstand me if I say that it is our privilege to be called to be the Lord’s witnesses in a very dark and gloomy day. Perhaps sometimes we wish we had lived in a different day when there were thousands attended the house of God and when religion was honoured in the land. But it is our privilege to be called to be the Lord’s witnesses in this dark and gloomy day. They say the stars shine brighter when the night is darker. There is one of those little Psalms (Psalm 134) in which the Lord speaks to His servants who serve Him by night. We are called to serve the Lord by night. How the Lord is honoured and glorified when His little remnant according to the election of grace in the dark and gloomy day honour Him and serve Him by night! This was only a small remnant, but didn’t they honour the Lord and aren’t they honoured in Scripture even to the present day!

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.” You notice how the Lord’s people are described, how the little remnant are described: “They that feared the Lord.” This is the mark of every sinner saved by grace from the day Adam fell right down to the end of time. They feared the Lord. There may be many things they lack, many things in which they fail, many things they do not possess, many things they wish they did possess. But every sinner saved by grace possesses the holy fear of God. Let us be very clear on this. People sometimes say, What must there be, what must there not be, at the beginning of the work of grace, when the new birth takes place? Well, I find three times in Scripture, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning.” “The fear of the Lord is the beginning.” “The fear of the Lord is the beginning.” If you possess the holy fear of God, then you will get to heaven, but if you do not possess the holy fear of

God, whatever else you do possess, then your religion when weighed in the balances is found wanting.

“Then they that feared the Lord.” When God begins His work in a sinner’s heart, when the new birth takes place (“Ye must be born again”), then there is always this: the holy fear of God is implanted there. And if the fear of the Lord is the beginning, if you and I do not possess it, then we have not yet begun in the things of God. “They that feared the Lord.” We do not hear so much about the fear of the Lord today as in a former day. When I was a boy, I remember even worldly people speaking of someone would say, He is a God-fearing man; she is a God-fearing woman. We do not seem to hear the expression very much today. Is it because there is not so much of the fear of the Lord about? But I think you will find this if you read the Bible carefully, that the Word of God is full of this: the fear of the Lord. There are so many precious promises to those who do fear the Lord. For instance, we read one of those precious promises this morning: “Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings.” “Unto you that fear My name.” Also, there are so many exhortations to fear God. “Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.” There are so many wonderful things said about possession of the fear of the Lord. It is “a fountain of life to depart from the snares of death.” “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will shew them His covenant.”

“Then they that feared the Lord.” And this separated them from the whole of that ungodly generation. It separated them inwardly and it separated them outwardly, because the fear of the Lord will always affect a person’s conduct. It is a very active grace, an active principle. It will affect all you do. “The fear of the Lord.” And the people in Malachi’s day could pick out the little remnant. They could see there was something different. Because the fear of the Lord will always separate you from the world and separate you from the professing world. It will make a difference, but it will be a double difference, beloved friends. If you possess the fear of the Lord, it will make a marked difference between you and the world, and it will make a marked difference between what you are now and what you once were. Can you trace that in your life? You are not what you want to be, what you hope to be, what you long to be, but you know you are not what you once were.

The fear of the Lord will make that vital difference. If you will, this is what conversion is. People talk a lot about conversion today, but this is the vital ingredient in it, the possession of the fear of the Lord. This will turn you right round. The old minister said, “What is conversion?” and he turned right round with his back to the congregation, and said, “That is conversion.” If you do not know anything of this, your religion is wrong.

The fear of the Lord will make a difference between what you used to be and what you are now. It is like the little girl who came before the church and the pastor said, “Do you believe you possess the fear of the Lord?” She said, “Yes.” He asked, “What makes you think so?” She said, “Well, once I used to dust very carefully for my mistress wherever she could see, but now I dust and sweep just as carefully where I know she will never look.” That is the fear of the Lord. Like the dear man who sold corn down in Sussex, and he went to weigh it out in some back place. A person came to buy some corn. When he went to weigh it, Satan tempted him that if he gave short weight, no-one would ever know. But he said, “As the fear of the Lord was tender in my conscience, never did a man get a better weight than that.”

The fear of the Lord will affect your life and behaviour, and there will be a difference between what you once were and what you are now. There will be a difference, because the fear of the Lord will always separate you from the world. Do you know this two-fold separation? “Then they that feared the Lord.” That difference between what you once were and what you are now, and that difference between you and the world.

“Then they that feared the Lord.” If it is so vital, what is the fear of the Lord? Well, it does not mean being frightened of God, though usually when people first possess the fear of the Lord, they *are* frightened of the Lord, they are frightened of dying, they are frightened of the judgment day, they are frightened of eternity. But rather it means that loving, tender, holy reverence for the Lord and His name and His ways. In other words, the fact that there is a God in heaven comes into your life and it affects everything. It is with you when you rise up and it is with you when you go to sleep and it is with you right through the day. There is a God in heaven and your religion is before the all-seeing eye of that holy

God. That is the fear of the Lord, that awe, that reverence for this great, holy, almighty God in heaven. And so you will feel something of your unworthiness, your sinfulness, your guilt, before this great, this holy God. And then it will have this vital effect: your religion will be real. It will not be just like some hobby or some pastime that you put down and then wait till next week. It will be with you all the time. You will have a daily religion, an hourly religion, a secret religion, a personal religion, a real religion, a religion before God. O to know something of the reality of vital godliness!

“Then they that feared the Lord.” And there will be love in it. There will be love to the people of God and there will be love to the Lord’s ways and His house and His holy day. And there will be love to the Saviour. Because if there is not any love in your religion, it is solemnly defective. There is love in it. Years ago I remember this verse was often quoted by the old ministers:

“Fear is a grace which ever dwells
With its fair partner, love;
Blending their beauties, both proclaim
Their source is from above.”

It is fear which works by love.

“Then they that feared the Lord.” It is often spoken of like this: “An unctuous light to all that’s right, a bar to all that’s wrong.” I used to hear that a lot and wondered, whatever does it mean? “An unctuous light to all that’s right, a bar to all that’s wrong.” Well, I take it to mean this: that if you and I possess the fear of the Lord, there will be some things and our old flesh longs to do them, but, “So did not I, because of the fear of God.” And then on the other hand, there will be some things our flesh does not want to do; we shrink from them; we do not want to walk in this way. It is painful to the flesh; it is taking up our cross. But because we see it is right, and God commands it, and it is for the honour and glory of His name, then, “This is the way, walk ye in it.” You will know the fear of the Lord constraining you to do some things and restraining you from others. Well, it was this that marked this people, that marked them out as the people of God, that made a difference, and made them shine as bright lights in a sinful, dying world.

Now, “Ye are My witnesses.” I believe the world for the most part has a respect when it sees the holy consistency of a child of God walking in the fear of the Lord. It does not agree with him; it does not like him; but there is a certain reverence. The Word says, “Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ.” Now the world does not read the Epistle to the Romans and the world does not read the Epistle to the Galatians, but the world reads you. And the world does not set much of a standard for itself, but it sets a high standard for those who profess the name of Christ. And even if the world were to read the Epistle to the Romans and the Epistle to the Galatians, it would not understand it, but it does understand something of the tenderness and the humility and the love and the kindness of a child of God walking in the holy, filial fear of the Lord. O that we might know more of it, that it might abound, that it might be this that marks our religion! There is so much religion today and there is so much spoken, so much said, so much done, but this is what the Lord brings it down to, this is what the Lord looks for, this is what the Lord listens for, this is what the Lord remembers, this is what the Lord puts in His book of remembrance. It is not what you and I think or count, but it is what the Lord thinks and counts. “They that feared the Lord.” O that through mercy you and I might be found amongst them!

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another” – not one *about* another! “They that feared the Lord spake often one *to* another.” They spoke together, in this dark, gloomy day, of the things of God, the preciousness of the Saviour, the things that concerned their everlasting peace. They spoke together of their sorrows; they encouraged one another; they comforted one another. Also, they warned one another; they reproved one another. Where do you find today a child of God who can go to another and give a loving reproof, and where today do you find a child of God who can receive that loving reproof? “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.” John Kent has beautifully put it in verse:

“When saint to saint, in days of old,
Their sorrows, sins, and sufferings told,
Jesus, the Friend of sinners, dear,
His saints to bless was present there.”

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.” In other words, this is Christian communion, and it seems to be something which is almost lacking today in the church of God. Christian communion, the Lord’s people communing one with another on the things of God.

As far as I remember, I only once ever before preached from this text and I remember the occasion well. It was the Lord’s day following the death of Miss Lily Ellingham. You older ones remember her with affection. How I was led to that text: if ever I visited Miss Ellingham’s home, the conversation there was always on the things of God, on God’s holy Word, on the services of the previous day or the last Sabbath, or of what the Lord in love and mercy had done for her soul. You older ones remember in the early days she lived with her sister, Miss Flossie Ellingham, and she put in her little bit, and that was very gracious. In the end of her life, she lived with dear Mrs. Dockrill, and she also had something gracious to say. Those souls I have mentioned, they only had one interest and that was the things of God, and they lived for Bethel. O what a humble, gracious, quiet witness it was! But with that generation passing away, that older generation, this blessing of the communion of saints seems as if it has been withdrawn from the church of God. We live in breach of promise, as Mr. Popham would have said.

The sweet communion of the saints. We read of those in the New Testament who were plagued with a deaf and dumb spirit and it seems that the professing church of God is plagued with a deaf and dumb spirit. Where is the hearing of the Word with profit and where is the speaking of the profit under the Word? The Lord says, “The days come ... that I will send a famine ... of hearing the words of the Lord.” Let us get this clear, not a famine of the Word of the Lord. There is no famine of the Word of the Lord. There are more Bibles in England than there ever were. There are more services in our chapels than there ever were. “The days come ... that I will send a famine ... of hearing.” It is not a famine of the *Word*, but it is a famine of the *hearing*. “A famine ... of hearing the words of the Lord.” If you come across a dumb child, it is as often as not because the child is stone deaf. Where there is a famine of hearing of the Word of the Lord, there will always be the famine of the speaking of the Word of the Lord. Well, may the Lord return to Jerusalem in mercies and cast out the

deaf and dumb spirit and enable us to say, “Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what He hath done for my soul.”

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it.” And the point is, He was pleased with it; it delighted Him. Nothing delights the Lord more than to hear His children speak of Him and speak well of Him.

“The Lord hearkened, and heard it.” Of course, there is a very solemn side to this: that every word we speak is heard in heaven. This is very solemn. Now you children, you little ones in the Sabbath school, you sing it:

“God is in heaven. Would He know
If I should tell a lie?
Yes; though I said it very low,
He’d hear it in the sky.”

That is solemn, that the words we speak are heard in heaven. But there is a blessed side to it. Your feeble prayers, your feeble cries, O they seem so feeble, but, “the Lord hearkened and heard it.” Those feeble cries ascend to heaven. There is a Scripture which says they “entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth.” And our hymnwriter says,

“To Thee I lift my eyes;
Thou Son of David, hear,
And let my feeble cries
Bring Thy salvation near.”

Did you know that, that feeble cries bring salvation near? And those feeble cries are heard in heaven. O perhaps you feel your prayers are feeble, your cries are feeble, but they are heard in heaven.

In one of George Burder’s sermons (George Burder, the author of hymn 750), he said a little boy was lost in the snow in a drift and he started to cry. At midnight there was a gentlemen in a house and he was opening the window, and he thought he could hear a very feeble cry. He could hardly tell at first what the feeble cry was, but being a kind man, he dressed and went out. As he got nearer, he could hear this feeble cry, “Lost, lost, lost!” He followed the feeble cry till he found a little boy lost in the snowdrift. He took him out and warmed him and fed him. But Burder’s point was that the feeble cry, “Lost, lost, lost!” brought salvation

to the little boy. He spoke of a sinner under a sense of guilt crying out, “Lost, lost, lost!” and perhaps feeling it to be so feeble, but He who came to seek and to save that which was lost hears it and answers and He delivers and saves.

“The Lord hearkened, and heard.” There is a solemn side to it, but there is a blessed side: our poor prayers. But then this: the conversation of the Lord’s people as it honours and glorifies His name. “The Lord hearkened, and heard it.” Pondering over this yesterday, it seems at first like a repetition. “The Lord hearkened, and heard.” Why does it not just say, “The Lord heard it”? Well, it is more than that. He was listening for it. He hearkened first, and then He heard it. He was listening for it. And it is a wonderful thing that the Lord listens *to* the voice of His people and He listens *for* it. The Lord looks down from heaven, and He is listening, hearkening. What is He listening for? “If any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.” O here He is hearkening. What are His people saying? How are they talking? Is it God-honouring? Is it God-glorifying? Do they ever speak of what He has done? Do they help one another, encourage one another, rebuke one another, or is there this deaf and dumb spirit which dishonours the Lord of life and glory?

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be Mine.” There is a book of remembrance in heaven. That is how precious the Lord’s dear people are to Him. That is how precious the holy fear of God in their hearts is to Him. That is how precious their conversation and testimony is to Him.

“And a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name.” A few years ago I was taking one of our funerals up at the Vale cemetery (and exactly whose funeral it was, I cannot remember). There was an old grave-digger there, and when I had finished reading the committal, he came to me and said, “There are not many people nowadays believe there is a book of life,” because I had read the passage at the grave about those whose names are in the book of life. Then the old man said, “There is another book that most

people do not know anything about, and that is called the book of remembrance, and it is written for them who feared the Lord and thought upon His name.” Then he went away. I had never seen him before and I have never seen him since. I do not know who he was, but you do not know where the Lord has His hidden ones.

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name.”

(If the Lord will, the evening sermon on the same text will be published next month.)