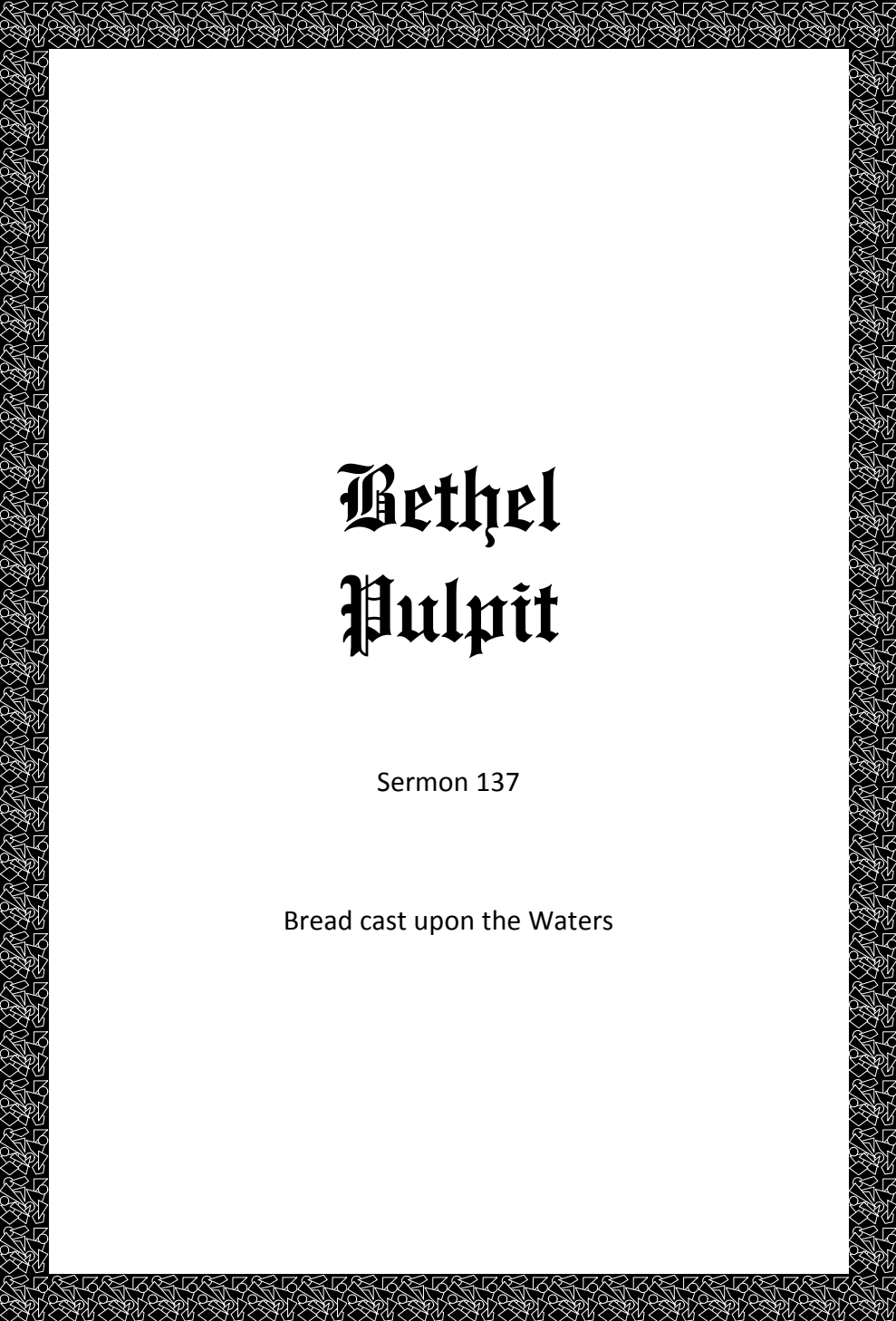




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 137

Bread cast upon the Waters

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 3rd November, 1996**

Text: “*Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days*” (*Ecclesiastes 11.1*).

This is the sure promise of the gracious effect of the preaching of the Word. Though it may be after many days, yet, “To him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward.” So often we feel, “I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought.” So often we feel, “We have not wrought any deliverance in the earth.” Yet the Lord’s word still stands: “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt *find it*” – it is going to be found; it will not be swept away; it will not be lost – “thou shalt find it after many days.”

Now the analogy here is this. By *bread*, of course, we understand *bread corn*, or the seed. This is the sowing of the seed. And in many parts of the East, the time of sowing was after the rivers had overflowed their banks. Then, just as the water began to subside, the sowers went and cast their seed literally on the waters. And then, as the water subsided into the earth, the seed penetrated with it and later there was a plentiful harvest. That is the analogy here. “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” The vital point is that it must be good seed; it must be the everlasting gospel of the grace of God. But here is the promise based on God’s covenant, God’s faithfulness: “Thou shalt find it after many days.” We are to “give a portion to seven, and also to eight” (verse 2). O how often I have mentioned that in prayer! Under the preaching of the gospel there is to be a portion, not only for seven, but for that eighth one who does not feel that he deserves the blessing, that eighth one who feels left out, that eighth one who feels passed by, that eighth one who, like the man at the pool of Bethesda, has waited thirty-eight years. “Give a portion to seven, and also to eight.”

“He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap” (verse 4). How often over the years that has been a word in season to me! What kind of a sower is this man who one day looks out and it is too windy, so he thinks he dare not venture, and the next day he looks out and the wind has subsided, it is calm, but the clouds

are dark and threatening? “He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.” It is not just a word to preachers. It is a word to every sinner saved by grace, and it is this, and it applies to so much in our lives: to “be instant in season, out of season.” It is an easy thing for us to be instant – instant in prayer, instant in reading the Word of God, instant in preaching, instant in chapel attendance, instant in all the things which fall to our lot – when we are in season. “Be instant in season, out of season.” And it is the same point here. Beware of always observing the wind and always regarding the clouds. You have to look to Him who holds the wind in His fist. You have to look to Him, as enabled by grace, who puts the bow in the cloud. “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” He still does. We have to walk by faith and not by sight.

“As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all” (verse 5). You cannot understand the wind; you cannot control the wind, and you do not know where the Holy Spirit is at work or where the Holy Spirit is going to work. Neither can you understand the miracle of a birth. And you and I do not know where the new birth has taken place. With a child of God, it is not always easy for him to trace the very time when the new birth took place in his life. “So thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.”

“In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand” (verse 6). “If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small.” There has to be a going on, a continuing. There has not to be a turning back. “Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son, bids you undismayed go on.” “In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand.” Some people begin well, but they do not continue. Many seem to make a good start, but they do not make a good end. “In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand.” In the morning of life, sow thy seed, and then in the evening of old age, withhold not thine hand.

“Thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good” (verse 6). O the awful mystery of divine sovereignty in the effect of the Word! There may be two people sitting together in chapel, and one’s heart could be touched and the other could be left. In the eighteenth century, London visitors were advised to

go and see the two great wonders of eighteenth-century London. One was to see the greatest actor of all time, David Garrick, and the other was to hear Romaine preach. A wealthy man and his wife followed this advice, and they went out from hearing Romaine, and the husband committed suicide, while the wife was blessed. That is the mystery of divine sovereignty. It will not do you any good if the person sitting next to you in chapel is blessed and you are passed by.

“Thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that.” Sometimes the preacher thinks *this* will prosper and it is *that*, and sometimes he thinks *that* will prosper and it is *this*. Or sometimes you think it is *this* person and it is *that*, or you think it is *that* person and it is *this*. The well-known example of this was when William Gadsby was so burdened about the young men who sat in the front row of his chapel – what a blessing they would be to his church. Week after week he preached to them, but there was no effect. But there was a little cripple boy in the gallery steps, and the words Gadsby was aiming at the men on the front row, the Lord was blessing to the little cripple boy in the gallery steps. “Thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.” The mystery of divine sovereignty, yet the encouragement to go on, and the sure and certain promise that God’s Word shall not return to Him void, but it shall accomplish that which He please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto He sent it.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.” Of course, when we think of this sowing and this reaping, the spring-time and the harvest-time, “He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed,” we think especially of Calvary where the dear Lord Jesus went forth weeping. O those tears of sorrow! Sinner, “Drop the soft tribute of a tear, for He shed many a tear for you.” He went forth weeping, bearing precious seed – the church of God. And there His agonies were the birth pangs of the church. And He “shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing His sheaves with Him.” “Thou shalt find it after many days.” It is many days since the Lord Jesus hung bleeding, dying on the cross, but He still sees of the travail of His soul, and is satisfied, and shall to the end of time. “Thou shalt find it after many days.” The work of Christ can never be in vain. The Saviour did not die in vain. It was for the joy that was set before Him that He “endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at

the right hand of the throne of God.” And it is on the ground of this that the Lord has promised that His Word shall be blessed and that bread cast upon the waters shall not be lost, not be swept away, but it shall be found after many days.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” Some of you may be saying, Surely this is just to do with preachers and preaching? Well, in large measure it is, but not altogether. But if it were only concerning preaching, then what a burden there should be in the hearts of the congregation to plead a word like this: “Lord, Thou hast said” – to hold the King in the galleries – “Lord, Thou hast said that bread cast upon the waters shall be found after many days.”

But there are Sabbath school teachers, aren’t there? I have sometimes thought perhaps in a special sense this has a good application to those who teach in the Sabbath school. Why do I say that? Because if you read the history of the church of God, and especially our old magazines, with preaching it is often that people have been wrought on at the time, and there has been the clear conviction and the clear deliverance. But with Sabbath school teaching, it seems so often that it is some word, whether it was sown in the heart at the time or whether it was only remembered and later sown in the heart, but even in old age there has been the gracious effect. J. C. Philpot felt that was perhaps one of the greatest points of the Sabbath school. He felt that many a little hymn which even the youngest children learnt, the Lord would use it, perhaps even in old age, even after they had left the truth all their lives, and He would apply it to their hearts. And he was writing in the days when, because of industrial poverty, many people were emigrating to the States and to Australia. He said he believed there would be persons in a far-off country, remote from where the truth was ever preached, yet something they had heard in the Sabbath school would be as bread cast upon the waters, and found after many days. I hope the congregation appreciates the loving labours of our Sabbath School teachers Sabbath afternoon after Sabbath afternoon.

“Go, labour on; spend and be spent,
Thy joy to do the Father’s will;
This is the way the Master went;
Should not the servant tread it still?”

“Thou shalt find it after many days.” Some of you will be familiar with that beautiful poem, *The Noisy Seven*. This poor, old man in the Sabbath School taught seven boys and they did not show any interest. The poor, old man used to go home week after week, heart-broken. The poem was written many years later, and tells how after the man was dead, each one was wrought upon by the Spirit of God and called by His grace. “Thou shalt find it after many days.” It is nice if we find it after few days. But, “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.”

If you have a Bible which at the top of the chapter in italics gives a summary, you will perhaps be surprised if not even shocked that for verses 1 to 6 the title given is, “Directions for charity.” Again, perhaps surprisingly, I think you will find that the old divines and the commentators take these first six verses in Ecclesiastes 11 as directions for Christian charity, for giving, for doing good. In our chapels we have always understood this verse to refer to the Word of God and its gracious effect, and I am sure we are right. But we must not altogether ignore the old interpretation, the one the translators of the Bible put in their summary at the top. “Cast thy bread upon the waters.” That is, if the Lord has blessed you with wealth, do not keep it in your own home. “Cast thy bread upon the waters.” Spread it about; use it; do good with it. “For thou shalt find it after many days.”

They apply the same to, “Give a portion to seven, and also to eight.” If this eighth person asks you for help and you have already helped seven, do not refuse him. “Thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.” The time may come when you are not able to help anyone. I think it is right to mention this in passing – real religion, practical religion. I am not being legal – I hate it – but constrained by the love of Christ. Not just your money: your time, your ability, helping people and the assistance you can give, because if your religion is real, it will have a sanctifying effect and you will not be able to live to yourself. You will live to the honour and glory of God.

If you want a commentary on what it is to cast your bread upon the waters, read through the closing chapters of the epistles, for instance, Ephesians 4, 5 and 6. There are some close things there that tell us how to cast our bread upon the waters. And there is a promise: “Thou shalt find it

after many days.” This is not legal ground, but the promise still stands: “Them that honour Me I will honour.” And also, “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” “Cast thy bread upon the waters” – constrained by the love of Christ – “for thou shalt find it after many days.”

Perhaps some of you read that beautiful little account in a magazine some time ago. There was a poor woman taken to hospital in America, where the fees for the operation were very heavy. She had to have the operation, but she was terrified she would not be able to pay the fees afterwards. It proved to be a major operation. To the amazement of the staff, the leading consultant took charge and did everything himself. Although it was difficult, he made a magnificent job of this operation. He saw the woman, and she was so grateful to him, but she said, “Sir, I am so fearful I will never be able to pay, and I never thought it would be the leading consultant who would give me all this personal care.” He smiled. He said, “There is not any fee at all; it is completely free of charge.” She asked, “Why?” He said, “You have probably forgotten many years ago a young medical student coming to your farm when you were a girl, exhausted, asking for a rest and a drink of water. You were a girl. You do not remember me. But you treated me with such kindness. You brought me a glass of milk; you found me somewhere comfortable to rest; you arranged me something to eat, and I thought, if ever I see that girl again I will do my utmost to reward her.”

Now we are not speaking on legal ground, but, “God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward His name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.” Those of you who lovingly care in the Bethesda Home for our aged friends, and those of you who have cared, or do now care, for aged, loved ones, or those of you – O there are so many things you feel you are led into for Jesus’ sake. “God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward His name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.”

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” But then there is a casting of your bread upon the waters in prayer, and there is the encouragement here to pray, even if you have to wait many days. “Cast thy bread upon the waters.” Keep on praying. Do not let Satan turn you aside from the throne of grace. Do not let Satan say that

because the Lord has not answered, He never will. “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.”

“Without cessation pray;
Your prayers will not prove vain;
Our Joseph turns aside to weep,
But cannot long refrain.”

“Cast thy bread upon the waters.” There is a sowing in prayer, and often the prayers of the godly have been answered, even when they have been long dead. We read at the end of the seventy-second Psalm, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.” But the answers to David’s prayers were not ended. A dear child of God dies, but there are still answers to his prayers to come.

I have often thought about Mrs. Wiltshire, whom some of you knew. She was born into a titled family, a family that was destitute of any knowledge of vital truth. At university she met and later married Dr. Wiltshire, who became an eminent scientist and head of Kew Gardens. The Lord dealt with her graciously and savingly, and in her own family background she had not been brought up in any gracious knowledge of the truth. When she became interested in spiritual things, she found out she was a direct descendant of Thomas Scott, the famous commentator, John Newton’s friend, a renowned minister. So with great interest she procured the life of Thomas Scott, and to her amazement found that godly man prayed for his descendants to the fourth and fifth generations, and she realised she was included when that godly man prayed. Well, Thomas Scott lived in the 1700’s. Here was a direct descendant living in the twentieth century, but here were his prayers answered, even to the fifth generation. “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” Parents, go on praying for your children. Go on praying for your friends.

What about those things you have in your life, those things in providence? There is a sowing in prayer. “Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters, that send forth thither the feet of the ox and the ass.” May you be encouraged still to pray. May you be blessed with clear views of the throne of grace, the mercyseat sprinkled with blood, the ground of a sinner’s access, the ground of his acceptance. May you view the power of God, His omnipotence, His ability to hear and answer prayer. May you

view His tender compassion, His willingness, His faithfulness. And may you remember the many promises. “Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.” “The cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto Me, and I will hear it.” So do not forget this sowing in prayer.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” And then, beloved friends, there is a sowing in gracious exercise. When the new birth takes place in a sinner’s heart, then that sinner immediately begins to cast his bread upon the waters. There is a sowing for eternity, and, “He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed” – casting his bread upon the waters – “shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.” O “cast thy bread upon the waters.” The Lord never said “unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain.” “Thou shalt find it after many days.” O but this living soul going forth weeping. Popular religion goes forth laughing, and there is a lot of noise and confusion and clapping. If the Lord deals with you, you will go forth weeping. I do not mean necessarily that the tears will flow down your face, but there is the judgment day, a heaven, a hell.

“What must I do, and whither flee,
To escape the vengeance due to me?”

You will go forth weeping, bearing precious seed, the seed of grace that is sown in your heart by the Spirit of God, and that seed you are sowing in gracious exercise and prayer. And it is precious seed, because it is God’s own work in your heart.

But you will go forth. There will be a going forth from the world. There will be a going forth from your past life. There will be a going forth from your old companions. You will go forth. “Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach.” You will go forth, casting your bread upon the waters, in secret exercise, in gracious exercise. “He that goeth forth and weepeth.” You will go forth to the secret place. “Ye shall be gathered one by one, O ye children of Israel.” He will lead you forth by a solitary way. He will bring you into the wilderness. At times you will feel the loneliness of it; you will feel to be alone. But the Lord is having personal dealings with you. “He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; He led him about, He instructed him,

He kept him as the apple of His eye.” And there you will cast your bread upon the waters. You are sowing in tears.

“Behold, he prayeth,” was God’s testimony to Ananias concerning the reality of Saul of Tarsus’ religion. And you, as you cast your bread upon the waters, as you go forth weeping, as you bear the precious seed, it will be, “Behold, he prayeth.” And you will want mercy through the blood of Christ. You will want forgiveness. You will want to be made right for heaven. You will not take things for granted. You will want Christ to be revealed, Christ to be made precious. You will want to be completely covered in His glorious righteousness. You will want to be washed in His precious, sin-atonement blood. You will want the personal application, the personal assurance. So you go forth weeping, bearing precious seed, and you cast your bread upon the waters.

“Thou shalt find it.” There is divine certainty here. “Thou shalt find it after many days.” “He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall” – now may faith be able to hold this fast – “*doubtless.*” There is no uncertainty here. *Doubtless.* “Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.” That is going to be your harvest. You say, “*Rejoicing?*” “Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.” That goes right beyond, goes right into eternity, right into heaven. “Your joy no man taketh from you.” There are two sides to real religion: sorrow and joy. But with the people of God, it will end in joy, everlasting joy. But with the wicked, “This shall ye have of Mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow.”

“Cast thy bread upon the waters” – in gracious exercise – “for thou shalt find it after many days.” “He shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.” Perhaps some of you are saying, “I really wish it said, Thou shalt find it after few days.” Well, sometimes the Lord’s people do find it after few days; often they find it after few days. But the point here is this: that if they do *not* find it after few days, they most certainly shall find it after many days. May that be an encouragement to you, to those of you who have waited long.

But there is another side to it. There is another sense in which you will be glad it does not say *few*. In this sense: the work of grace in your heart, it will be found after many days. It will be found to all eternity. It

can never be destroyed. So there is a blessedness in this sense when you think of it being many days. The good seed which has been implanted in a sinner's heart, even after many days, after the trials and temptations and sorrows, it will be found. The work of grace will not be overthrown; it will not be destroyed.

“The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is *Yea* and *Amen*,
And never was forfeited yet.”

It will be found after many days. You have a sweet hope that God has begun the work in your heart. You have a sweet hope the truth, the gospel, His Word has a place in your affections. It will be found after many days. Through all your trials and sorrows and temptations, “Thou shalt find it after many days.” It will be found; it will not be destroyed. And when a believer comes to the swellings of Jordan, that work will be found, and the swellings of Jordan can never sweep away the work of grace in a sinner's heart. “Thou shalt find it after many days.” And then in heaven for ever and ever, the many days of a never-ending eternity, the people of God will reap that rich harvest of their sowing in tears, not through merit, but through grace, to the praise, honour and glory of the Saviour's name.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.”