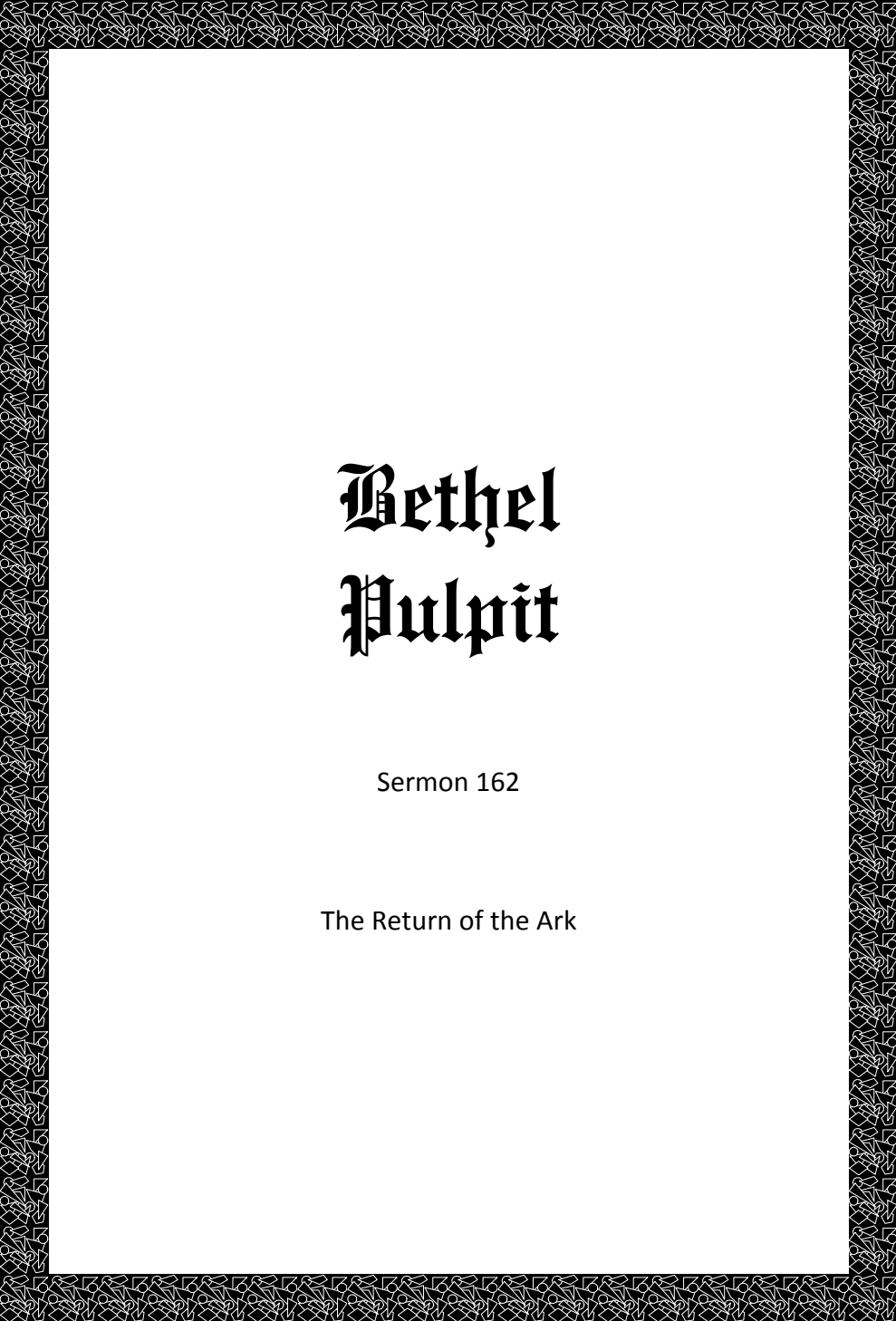




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 162

The Return of the Ark

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 29th November, 1998**

Text: *“And they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it” (1 Samuel 6. 13).*

The ark of the covenant was the most precious piece of furniture in the whole tabernacle. It represented the immediate presence of God. In its fullest sense, it set forth Christ. It was kept in the holiest of all. It had never to be treated with irreverence. It was only to be seen once a year on the great day of atonement when the high priest entered the holiest of all and sprinkled it with blood. It was there that God had promised, “There I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat” – the mercy seat, of course, being part of the ark. Now God was very jealous concerning the holy ark of the covenant. It was most sacred. It was most holy.

Now there had been two occasions when by divine commandment the ark was used in a different way. One was the crossing of the River Jordan. They had to take the holy ark of God, the priests bearing it before the people right down into Jordan, and the waters separated and Israel crossed into the Promised Land dry-shod. And the second occasion was the fall of Jericho, when the priests for even days had to carry the ark of the covenant round the city and then the seventh day, seven times, and then, “Shout; for the Lord hath given you the city.” Those were two special occasions. They were by commandment, and through the holy ark of God, God Himself performed a miracle.

Now in these passages that I read to you this morning (parts of 1 Samuel 4-6) things were in a very sad and solemn state in Israel. There was much darkness, spiritual declension, spiritual decay. The two priests of the Lord, Hophni and Phinehas, dishonoured their priesthood and their profession by their ungodliness. The aged high priest, Eli, was a godly man, and yet he dishonoured the Lord by his weakness, partiality to his own family, unwillingness to reprove sin, unwillingness to reprove wrongdoers. And so things were in a most dreadful state in Israel. And

then there was war, war with Israel's inveterate enemies, the Philistines, and Israel was sorely defeated in battle. Then the Israelites thought of a very daring plan, and it was this. They would go out to battle against the Philistines and take the holy ark of God with them into battle. They remembered what happened at the River Jordan. They remembered what happened at Jericho. And they thought, if only they had the holy ark with them, they were sure of victory. It was a most daring plan, but they had no warrant from the Lord. They had no commandment, and it all ended in disaster, confusion. They said, "Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, *it* may save us." *It* did not. What is the symbol of the Lord's presence without the Lord Himself? Really, it was the essence of superstition. They took it like some kind of mascot. They were not concerned about their sin, their rebellion, their wickedness. If only they had the outward sign of the Lord's presence with them, they felt it was all that mattered. And there is much of that religion about today: resting in the outward form, resting in superstition, taking things for granted. "*It* may save us." *It* did not.

So the holy ark of God was captured, and for seven long months was in the hands of the enemy of God's people, and really we are living in similar days today, when the ark of God is in the hands of the enemy. We read that "Eli trembled for the ark of God," and some of us tremble for the ark of God. What a blessing to Israel are those who tremble for the ark of God. I wonder how many of us here this morning are among them.

"The Lord, displeased, has raised His rod;
Ah! where are now the faithful few
Who tremble for the ark of God,
And know what Israel ought to do?"

Eli trembled for the ark of God, and when tidings came of its capture, it was more than he could bear. He heard that Israel was defeated; he stood that. He heard there was a great slaughter of many people; he was able to stand that. He heard that his two sons were slain in their sin, but he even withstood that. But when he heard that the ark of God was taken, he fell into a kind of swoon, and fell and broke his neck, "for he was an old man, and heavy." And then one of his sons' wives died in childbirth. "And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel."

How applicable for us and our churches to be reminded of these things today! One thing is very noticeable, that though the Lord chastened Israel, the Philistines could not sin lightly. I think you will notice this right throughout the Old Testament, that the Lord used the enemies of His people to scourge Israel, but they themselves did not escape. So you see the holy ark of God in the hands of the enemy. Who can stand before this terrible Lord God? If the Philistines captured the ark, it was for their own sorrow and their own discomfort. The dreadful plague came upon them so they passed the ark from city to city, only too glad to get rid of it. Our God is a great and holy God and no Philistines can play with the symbols of God presence. You see the ark of God in the house of Dagon, Dagon the Philistines' god, the fish god. And Dagon falls down before the ark of God, broken in pieces. But you see what superstition did. I do not think there is a more foolish verse in all Scripture than that which says that Dagon fell to the ground and was broken to pieces, and the Philistines to this day are never allowed to set foot on the place where Dagon fell! The foolishness of superstition!

There is an extremely important principle here. You cannot have Dagon and the holy ark of God in the same house. There are many people try it today. They come to chapel on the Lord's day, and then on the Monday they have Dagon in the house. You cannot have both. Either Dagon must fall in pieces, or the holy ark of God will leave your dwelling. It is so with any home and it is so with any church, any congregation. You cannot have the ark of God and Dagon together. It is either the one or the other. Either Dagon must fall down, broken in pieces, the spirit of the world, or else the holy ark of God will leave the place. And if it is so of a chapel, so of a home, it is so of a human heart, because many would have Dagon and Christ dwelling together in their heart. You can never have both. If your religion is real, you are not your own: you are bought with a price. You cannot have any Dagon's reigning in your heart. And if your religion is real, the Lord by His Spirit will break those Dagon's in pieces, and you will feel the painfulness of it. But you cannot have both. "Ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

And so, for these seven months, the holy ark of God was in captivity. Israel did not know what had happened to it. The holy Word of God records it, but Israel did not know. Israel did not know if they would ever

see it again. I believe there was a godly remnant in Israel who still trembled for the ark, longed for the appearance of the ark. Would the ark ever return? Would they ever see it again? Don't you feel it? Aren't we like this? Hasn't the holy ark of God departed from us? Shall we ever see it again? Shall we see better days in Israel, the outpouring of His Spirit? Shall we ever see these days again?

“Return, O holy Dove! return,
Sweet Messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn,
And drove Thee from my breast.”

I believe there were a few repenting sinners in Israel, a few praying souls in Israel. I believe there still are among us, there still are among the Israel of God, longing for the Lord's return.

Of course, the Philistines at length decided to send back the ark, on a cart drawn by these cows. They had to leave their calves. No-one guided them, no-one directed them, yet they made their way to Beth-shemesh, which was the nearest place on the borders of Israel to the land of the Philistines. “And they of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley.” The Lord was still merciful and gracious to Israel, despite all their sin. He still sent them the harvest. The bow was still in the cloud. The ancient promise still stood, made with Noah, “seedtime and harvest.” They were still recipients of God's mercy. “And they of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley,” and they had a surprise. We get surprises. Often they are sad surprises, solemn surprises. O but how blessed it is when we have a gracious surprise, when we hear something which rejoices our heart! What a surprise they had! They “were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it” – and well they might! For what did the holy ark of God mean to Israel? You can just imagine the scene, these humble men of Beth-shemesh labouring in the fields, and suddenly they see a strange sight. Can they believe their eyes? They look up, and there coming over the hills they can see a cart, and they can see it being pulled by these cows, and as it comes nearer, they can discern the outline of this sacred ark, this holy ark of God, and they rejoice to see it.

“They lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.” Now it is not the only time in Scripture when we read of someone

rejoicing to see the ark. Didn't David rejoice to see the ark when it was brought up to Zion, and when he danced before the Lord, and even his wife Michal misunderstood it? She looked at it from a carnal point of view. She chided with him. But he said, "It was before the Lord." O that holy joy which filled David's heart when he saw the ark, and he rejoiced to see it as the ark came up to Zion! Most people believe that was the occasion of the sixty-eighth Psalm, the entry of the ark into Mount Zion, and looking forward by precious faith to the glorious ascension of the incarnate Son of God into heaven. "Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive: Thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also." And he rejoiced to see it.

And then didn't Solomon rejoice to see the ark? He had the temple built. Was there ever a more magnificent building than Solomon's temple? But Solomon knew he needed more than gold and silver and ivory and precious stones. It was the Lord's presence he wanted. He prayed that prayer, "Arise, O Lord God, into Thy resting place, Thou, and the ark of Thy strength." O how his heart rejoiced when he saw the priests carrying the holy ark of God into that temple! And don't we long for it? "Arise, O King of grace, arise, And enter to Thy rest." We want to see the holy ark of God in the sanctuary, the mark, the symbol, the evidence of God's gracious presence. And we rejoice at it.

"They lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it." Well, there are two special things that will make our hearts rejoice, seeing the ark returning to Israel, and the first is this: when we see any token, when we see any evidence in the church of God, that the Lord is still with us, that He has not left us, that in love and mercy He has returned, that He is still blessing us, and we rejoice to see it. O doesn't it rejoice your heart when you see some little sign that the Lord has not left us for ever, that the Lord is still with us, that the Lord has returned to Jerusalem with mercies? How often we have prayed that prayer, thought of that Scripture, "I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem." And we rejoice to see it. And may we still pray for it, and may we rejoice when we see it. May we not fail to be thankful. May our hearts not be devoid of gratitude but bless and honour and thank the Lord for every token of His love and favour when the ark of God has been absent from us, when we

see the ark of God return. And we do rejoice, beloved friends, we do! “They lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.”

And then the second thing, when the Lord returns to you personally in love and mercy. You feel the ark of God has been absent from you. You have grieved the Lord. Your heart has been hard, carnal. You have been prayerless. You have not felt the Lord’s presence. You have not felt His blessing. You have not known His favour. You cannot really rejoice in a form of godliness or a round of service. You cannot rejoice just in the form, the symbol, the shell. You want the Lord to return. “Return, O Lord, how long?” You pray for it. You long for it. But then at last when you lift up your eyes and see the ark of God coming towards you, you rejoice to see it, don’t you? When the Lord assures you He still loves you, He has not cast you off, when there is some token of His favour, some crumb of mercy, when your heart is touched and made soft, when the Lord speaks to you, when He causes you to remember former mercies, when you feel His love shed abroad in your heart, when Christ the Redeemer once more is made precious, you rejoice to see it. O may we more and more see the ark of God returning to Israel, the ark of God coming to Beth-shemesh, and we will rejoice to see it. Returning to the church of God. Returning to our souls personally, despite all our sin and backsliding and guilt.

“They lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.” Along with this, that word in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles has especially been on my spirit. You remember there was a dispute in the early church concerning the law and the gospel and whether the painful rite of circumcision was still relevant, whether it was still necessary in the church of God. And then at last there was that great council, and the judgment was given by the Spirit of God. It was the gospel; it was not the law. Now they were in Christ, there was no longer the need for that painful rite of circumcision, and “they rejoiced for the consolation.” Again, I believe in two ways you will know something of rejoicing for the consolation. One is this: when you are in sorrow and sadness and distress, and especially when there is something you fear, and your heart shrinks from it, and how can you bear it? And then the tidings come of the Lord’s mercy, His answer to your prayer, the deliverance, and you rejoice for the consolation. And then the second thing: the sweet consolation in the gospel. “Are the consolations of God small?” When

you realise something of a condemning law and the flames and fire and smoke of Mount Sinai, but then when you hear of the gospel, and, “Jesus, Thy dear gasping breath and Calvary, say gentler things.” And you rejoice for the consolation.

“Pardon and grace, and boundless love,
Streaming along a Saviour’s blood;
And life, and joy, and crowns above,
Obtained by a dear bleeding God.”

And you rejoice for the consolation.

“They lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.” Of course, in its fullest sense, this lifting up their eyes, seeing what they had long awaited, what they had long expected, at last seeing the holy ark of God, in its fullest sense this represents Christ coming over the hills right down into the valley where they were. Well, there was a longing for the incarnation of Christ. The Old Testament church: “Oh that Thou wouldest rend the heavens, that Thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at Thy presence.” “Come, Thou long-expected Jesus! Born to set Thy people free.” And O that longing and waiting for the coming of the Son of God! “But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law.” “And they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.” Well Anna and Simeon did. “And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for Him.”

“They lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.” Now they were not in a church or a chapel. They were not in a synagogue. They were not in a temple. They were not in a tabernacle. They were just about their daily business. And how often the Lord in love and mercy appears to His dear children whilst they are at work, whilst they are at home, whilst they are about their lawful business, and they rejoice to see it. Why, the very place where you are is made none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven, and like Abraham’s servant, you bow your head and you worship. “They lifted up the their eyes, and saw the ark.” How suddenly, how unexpectedly that ark came! It seems no one knew, no one was expecting it. That is a good word: “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.” Now

you have waited long, and you cannot see any sign of His coming, and you sorrow because you have not got the presence of the ark of God, and you feel perhaps you never will see the ark, and Satan tells you Christ will never come right where you are and do for you all that you want, all that you expect. But the ark of God did come, suddenly, unexpectedly. They opened their eyes and looked, and there was the ark coming right where they were. “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.”

“And they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.” And that ark came in a strange way, an unexpected way. I do not know how the faithful Israelites thought the holy ark would come back, if they ever did see it again, but I do not really think that they expected it to come on a cart being drawn by some cows, lowing as they came along, and watched by those five lords of the Philistines. You know, beloved friends, we have a fault of dictating to God. Huntington said, “Don’t chalk down lines and bid the Lord walk between them, because He never will. His way is better than yours.” But in our minds we think how the blessing is going to come to the churches. In our minds we think how the blessing is going to come, if it ever comes, to our own souls. Now the Lord *will* come, the holy ark of God *will* return, because God has promised. But the Lord will do it in His way and not yours. And sometimes it will not be the way you thought. Sometimes it will not be the way you expected. But you will lift up your eyes and see it and rejoice in it, and you will find that God’s way is better than your way.

“And they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.” Just one other word before I close. I wish this could be left out, but it is in the passage, in the chapter, isn’t it? When the Lord comes in love and blessing and favour to the church of God, or to you personally, when the holy ark of God returns, O do pray that it might be sanctified. You see, there was this wonderful blessing, the Lord returning, the return of the ark, and the men of Beth-shemesh rejoiced to see it, but they did not act very graciously; they did not act very wisely. There was a lot of flesh. There was a lot of carnality. There was a lot of curiosity. They peered into the ark, which was forbidden. They did not tremble before its holiness. There was not the right reverence. There was not the awe upon their spirit. There was not the tender love. They were familiar. They were careless.

They took it for granted. Carnality prevailed. Curiosity prevailed. The men of Beth-shemesh looked into the ark and the Lord smote them, and smote them with a great slaughter. “And the men of Beth-shemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?” O the ark of God will return. The ark of God will return to Israel, will return to the church, will return to us personally. O but may we seek that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ might be with our spirit, that we might be kept from our own, and that rather than carnality, curiosity, familiarity, there might be that reverence, the holy fear of God, a soft heart, and glorifying the Lord’s name. “They lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.”