

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 170

The Burning Bush

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 11th July, 1999**

Text: *"The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush" (Deuteronomy 33. 16).*

These are among the last words that Moses, the man of God, ever spoke. God had told him that he was to die. "Get thee up into this mountain ... and die in the mount." And there the Lord buried Moses. In this chapter we have the last words of Moses, the man of God, as he blesses the tribes of Israel. He dearly loved them, despite all their failures and sins. He dearly loved them, despite all that he had suffered from them. And as he comes to his end, his mind goes right back to the burning bush. He is speaking of wonderful blessings. What kind of blessings can he wish the people of God? And this comes before his eyes: "The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush."

Let us be clear, beloved friends. There were many, many times that God met with Moses and Moses met with God, but the burning bush was the most remarkable of them all, and Moses could never forget it. So as he comes to his last day upon earth, as he thinks of the blessings he can bless the people of God with, his mind is taken right back to that most amazing day in all his life when God met with him in the wilderness at the burning bush. It is exactly the same with Jacob. If you read the end of Jacob's life, right at the very end in spirit he went back to Bethel. Bethel was to Jacob what the burning bush was to Moses. Jacob went back to Bethel and he said, "He blessed me there." So you see, these old patriarchs, as they come to the end, they have their spots and their places they can look back to. It will be your mercy and mine when we come to our last day if we have not to start beginning with God, learning religion there. It will be your mercy and mine if we can look back to those spots and places and say, "He blessed me there." "Dost mind the place, the spot of ground, where Jesus did thee meet?" How many of you have your Bethels, your burning bushes, those places where Almighty God met with you? Has God ever met with you in this chapel? That is what we pray for concerning many of you here and our young people, our children, that God might meet with you. You will not see Him, but it will be just as real a

meeting as when you are walking through the streets of Luton and you meet someone you know.

Well, Moses never forgot the burning bush and the lessons he learned there. So let me try to speak to you just a little about the burning bush and exactly what happened there. Moses had very mysterious dealings in his life. When he was forty years old, as led by the Spirit of God, he gave up everything for Christ's sake. He was willing to renounce riches, honour, fame. He was willing to renounce his standing as a prince in Egypt that he might identify himself with the poor, despised people of God. There never was such a choice as that, and never a greater act of faith. And what happens? Well, everything seems to go wrong. Moses realised that his life's work was to be with the people of God, and he was made willing for it, and what happens? Well, everything went wrong. His brethren rejected him. Pharaoh rejected him. He had to flee the country. He spends forty years in the backside of the desert, and those forty years are forty years of preparation for his life's work. It was Moses who said "seventy years," or in scriptural language, "three score years and ten." It was Moses who said it. But Moses did not begin his life's work until he was eighty years old, until he had had those forty years in the backside of the desert.

I want to speak very carefully and graciously here, but the fault with many preachers has been this, that they have never spent those years in the backside of the desert. For the most part in gracious preparation, the Lord takes a man, takes him aside, takes him apart and he is in the backside of the desert, and his old flesh kicks against it and he walks that lonely path year after year, and he says, "Why this, Lord?" It is all a preparation for what is to follow. It would be much better with us if more time was spent in the backside of the desert.

Moses said "three score years and ten," and he reaches that, and he has not begun his life's work. You say, "Moses, you are going to be this man God has shown you? You are going to lead His people? God has given you a job a little boy could do, looking after sheep in the backside of the desert!" There is the trial, that waiting time, waiting until the Lord is gracious. We sing, "His purposes shall ripen fast," but some of us look back and His purposes have seemed to ripen very slowly. But God does not make any mistakes. Many people have thought that apart from religion or godliness, Moses was the greatest man who ever lived. What a great work it was he did! No-one in Scripture did a greater work than Moses.

But he is seventy years old, seventy-one, seventy-two, and a silent God. He is separated from the people of God, separated away in the wilderness. There does not seem to be much going on between his soul and the Lord. We can read of forty years in the backside of the desert. Forty years is a long time when you have to walk it out year after year. A lot of you here this morning have not even lived forty years. He is forty when he begins, and now he is eighty, and still on the same little job, looking after sheep in the wilderness. “Hath God forgotten to be gracious?” The mystery of divine sovereignty. God is never in a hurry.

We have a clue given in the New Testament to Moses’ state of mind through those forty silent years. Shall we call them that, the silent years of Moses? And the clue we have is this: “He endured, as seeing Him who is invisible.” And you will find this, beloved friends. There are some times in your life when the one thing is if only you can endure. There is not much going on, not much happening. You seem dead, dry, barren, a silent God, the hiding of His face, and it is that enduring, that holding on, that continuing. “He endured, as seeing Him who is invisible.” We do just have another hint in the names that Moses gave to his two sons who were born while he was in the wilderness. The name of one means *I have been a stranger in a strange land*, and the name of the other means *the God of my fathers has been my help*.

So Moses, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, leading forth a few sheep in the wilderness and nothing happening. But one day something does! Perhaps some of you know that experience. Perhaps some of you *will* know it. In a sense, I was nearly twenty years in the backside of the desert. I have told you this often, that one day, I think it was January 3rd, 1956, I got a letter from a most solemn, discriminating pastor, inviting me to preach three Lord’s days that year in his pulpit. That was January 3rd, 1956. That was my burning bush, and my life has never been the same since. You do not know what might take place in your life tomorrow, or next week, or the week after. You might meet someone and your whole life is changed. You might receive a letter. You might receive a ’phone call. Something might happen, some joy, some sorrow, some wonderful blessing. You do not know what might happen.

Moses suddenly, unexpectedly, as he goes forth as he has always gone forth, sees an amazing sight. He sees something impossible happening. He sees one of the little bushes in the wilderness is burning. It is on fire. There is nothing strange about that, but the bush keeps on burning and keeps on burning and keeps on burning. Moses must often have seen a burning bush, but just a few minutes under that hot, eastern sun and it was burned completely out. But not today. It keeps on burning and burning. It does not burn out. It is not consumed. Obviously Moses' curiosity is excited. "I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." This is the moment of crisis in his life. This is when all his questions are going to be answered. This is when all his perplexities are going to be resolved. It was God who was dwelling in that burning bush. Here was an encounter with God. He had to learn reverence for holiness. "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." And really, that is a lesson that is sadly, solemnly missing in most present-day religion, a sense of the greatness of God, a sense of the holiness of God. If you once have that solemn, sacred realisation just how great God is and just how holy God is, your life will never be the same again. Witness Isaiah chapter 6, and the prophet Isaiah when he saw the Lord in the temple high and lifted up. He saw His majesty and glory, and he was never the same again. Moses was never the same again. I would that in all our services there might be that sense of reverence and godly fear, realising before whom we come, the great, the holy God. This lesson Moses learnt at the burning bush: "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." We wake up; it is Sunday morning; we go to chapel. And it might be just like we wake up another morning and it is the day we go shopping. May there be more of that sense that this is the meeting place where God meets with sinners. He says, "In all places where I record My name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee."

"Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." Of course, in gospel days the sign of humility and reverence is not taking our shoes from off our feet; it is the head covering, or the absence of the head covering (1 Corinthians 11). We have this sign. We have the head covering or, with the men and boys, we do not have the head covering. But do we have the blessedly reality that is signified, as Moses did here, the sense of reverence and holiness and godly

fear, that we come to the place where the great, the holy, the mighty God meets with His people and makes the place of His feet glorious?

Now just a word about this burning bush. This bush burned and burned and burned, yet it did not burn out; it was not consumed. What does it mean? What does it signify to us? Really, it signifies three things. First of all, the mysterious incarnation of the Son of God, that the Godhead dwelt in human flesh and yet that flesh was not consumed. “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” How was it possible that the great, the almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, could be incarnate, could become a real Man, could be born of a virgin, could dwell here on earth in the flesh?

The second thing signified by the burning bush was the church of God. To Moses it was this second point that was the real message to him. You see, the church of God is like the burning bush. It has always been opposed; it has always been persecuted; yet it has never been consumed and it never will. That was the Lord’s special message to Moses in the burning bush. Israel in Egypt were like a burning bush on fire – the burning heat of Pharaoh and the taskmasters. Yet the burning bush was not consumed. It was not Pharaoh who triumphed; it was the burning bush, the church of God. The Church of Scotland in its best days, in the time of the Covenanters, adopted the burning bush as its emblem. Look how the Church of Scotland in Covenanting times was so bitterly persecuted, yet the bush burned, but was not consumed. That is the church of God in all ages. “Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

And the third thing symbolised by the burning bush: each child of God and the work of grace in that sinner’s heart. Now dear child of God, you will be like that burning bush. There will be all those things against you. There will be indwelling sin. There will be temptation. There will be the world. There will be Satan. The bush burns, but the bush is not consumed. It is a wonderful thing for us this morning, those of us who believe in the Lord Jesus, that despite all our sins and our fears, we shall never be consumed. We deserve to be consumed, and sometimes we fear we may be consumed, but the bush burned, but the bush was not consumed.

And then we are reminded of those two very beautiful scriptures on this point, both in the prophets. One is this: “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed.” And apart from God’s mercies in Christ, we should long since have been consumed. But, “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness.” And the other beautiful scripture in the prophets: “For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Poor, sinful sons of Jacob, unworthy, sinful, our only hope in free grace. Not consumed. Why? God says, Because I do not change. You change, a lot of sinful changes, wicked changes, but I change not. In a word it is this:

“A faithful and unchanging God
Lays the foundation of our hope
In oaths, and promises, and blood.”

“I am the Lord, I change not,” in My everlasting love to My people, in My mercy, in My compassion, in My faithfulness. “I am the Lord, I change not; therefore” – for no other reason, everything in Christ, nothing in the sinner – “therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”

“The bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.” So these three things symbolised by the burning bush: first of all, God dwelling in human flesh; and second, the church of God in all its trials and persecutions; and third, the individual sinner saved by grace with all that he has to pass through, all that he has to endure, yet brought safely through and safe at last.

“The bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.” It was there at the burning bush that God revealed Himself by this great name, I AM. I AM THAT I AM. What did God mean by this great name? He is the eternal God. Before time had any being, He could say, I am. When time shall be no more, He can still say, I am. All things to Him are “one eternal now.” I AM, the great, the almighty, the incomprehensible God, everlasting, eternal. Here is something for you to think about when you go home this afternoon. It is a most beautiful theme; it would be nice to speak of it some time. Someone said (I do not know whether I altogether like the expression, but I know what they meant) that when the Lord said to Moses, I AM, it was like a blank cheque and you could fill in other things. But a theme for your meditation. When the Lord Jesus dwelt on

earth, He claimed this title for Himself. He said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” But this is it. This is the beauty of it. He joined so many things at the end of it. He said, “I am the good Shepherd”; “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”; “I am the Living Bread which came down from heaven”; “I am the Resurrection, and the Life”; and so you might go on. It is very beautiful to contemplate the *I ams* of Christ, and as you seek to meditate on them, I think you will find that in each case there is a very beautiful suitability of each of these *I ams* of Christ to the needs of His people.

“The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” Well, these various things concerning the burning bush, what happened there, what it meant, what Moses learned there, what he never forgot. And so you have Moses, before he dies, he goes right back to the burning bush, that remarkable experience. He especially thinks of that great God who met him at the burning bush, and as he is seeking to speak of blessings, what greater blessing than this: “The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush”?

Well, what about this expression, *good will*? It is one of those scriptural expressions that have been so perverted and spoiled. I mean, Christmas time comes, and we are reminded that the angels sang about good will over Bethlehem. “On earth peace, good will toward men.” And we get it every Christmas. People say, it is “the season of goodwill.” They mean that for once in the year you have to be nice to other people and send presents and all these other things. It is “the season of good will. “ You do not really think, do you, that the angels came down from heaven to sing about that? I take it when the angels sang about good will, they meant the eternal pleasure and sovereign purpose and good will of Almighty God to guilty sinners in the Person of His beloved Son. If I had not wanted to read Exodus 3 as the Scripture reading, which I thought I should, the account of the burning bush, I should have read Ephesians 1: “According to the good pleasure of His will.” In Ephesians 1, you have an opening up of what the good will of God is in Christ, His good will in covenant love and mercy towards poor, lost, ruined, unworthy, guilty sinners. That is the good will the angels sang about over Bethlehem. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” Christ had now come in love and mercy, fulfilling those everlasting, covenant purposes, the good will of His Father to be made known in salvation to poor, unworthy sinners. “The good will of Him that dwelt in

the bush” is exactly the same as the good will those angels sang about at Bethlehem.

“The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” If you want to put it very simply, it really means this: “The exceeding riches of His grace.” Moses could seek nothing better for Israel. We can seek nothing better for you as a beloved congregation than this: “The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush,” “the exceeding riches of His grace,” all the blessings in Christ. This is “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.”

But there are just two things especially precious that were made known to Moses at the burning bush and which are equally precious to us today. “The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” Now the first display of this good will was good will to poor, suffering, tried, tempted Israel. They were groaning beneath their taskmasters. They were in sorrow, in distress. They did not know this wonderful love and mercy and kindness and grace of God in heaven towards them, and neither do some of you this morning who are groaning under your inward and outward sorrows. But O that the Lord might make known to you personally the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush. Really it was this: “The Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt.” This is the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush. “And have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.” That is the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush, and it is the same this morning as when He appeared to Moses. This is the loving God, the God who sees, and the God who hears, and the God who knows, and the God who acts.

Now “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” What about this? “I have surely seen the affliction of My people.” What are your afflictions this morning? What are the taskmasters that make you groan? Is it Satan? Is it the law of God? Is it your hardness, your unbelief? Is it a person? The Lord says, “I have surely seen your affliction.” O that all seeing eye! “I ... have heard their cry.” They did not know it. They were crying and those cries were entering into heaven into the ears of the Lord God of Sabaoth. It is a beautiful word: “I ... have heard their cry.” And there is that beautiful Scripture, “He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of

thy cry.” So your cry has a voice. “I have surely seen the affliction of My people ..., and have heard their cry ...; for I know their sorrows.” O how many sermons could be preached on this, “I know their sorrows,” especially if you view it in Jesus! “He knows what sore temptations mean, for He has felt the same.” If you view it in the light of Calvary – “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow.” He says, “I know their sorrows.” May you know it, may you feel it this morning. This is “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” Moses wished them nothing better than this, and I can wish you nothing better than this.

“The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” “I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows.” Now this is it: “And I am come down to deliver them.” This is “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” He is going to come down and deliver you. He is going to come right where you are. And until then, “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.”

Like the old woman with her *T and P* by the verses she had experienced, *tried and proved*, we can write our *tried and proved* against that. I believe in the pulpit hymnbook it does say *T and P* by the side of that verse. “I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver.” Now that is “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.”

I said there were two things especially at the burning bush. This wonderful display of love and mercy, “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush,” that is one. The other is this (it is a most beautiful word): “Certainly I will be with thee” – the sweet assurance of the Lord’s gracious presence. That is what Moses wanted. He had met with God, but he had this great task before him. There was a mountain before him. He had to go and meet Pharaoh. He might be put to death. He had to meet the

people of God. They might despise him, ignore him. He said, “How can I go? Who am I, that I should go?” And the Lord said, “Certainly I will be with thee.” That answered everything. Then Moses could venture, he could go without fear. You can read right through Exodus, how the Lord was faithful to His promise: miracles performed; the Passover night; bringing Israel out of Egypt; the crossing of the Red Sea. “Certainly I will be with thee.” Perhaps some of you are a little bit like Moses. You are afraid. You say, “How can I go?” You have something to meet tomorrow, or next week, or in the unknown way. “Who am I, that I should go?” I have not the strength, the ability. How can I go? “And He said, Certainly I will be with thee” – the sweet assurance of His gracious presence.

There did come a time when Israel had sinned so badly that the Lord threatened no longer to go with them, and Moses could not bear that, and you will not be able to bear it. You will say, “If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence.” Perhaps you say that with everything that lies before you. “If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence.” “And He said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” If we have the Lord’s presence, we have everything, because if we have the Lord’s presence, we have the Lord Himself. And if God be with us, and “if God be for us, who can be against us?”

But I do like this – This is the kindness of God. This is “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush” – He puts that *certainly* on it. *Certainly*. The things of God are certain; the things of God are sure. Everything with you and me is unsure, uncertain, but not the things of God. O may the Lord speak it to you this morning as you venture forward, whatever your fears are. If you feel you ought openly to profess the Lord’s name, and like Moses you say, “Who am I, that I should go?” And the Lord says, “Certainly I will be with thee.” O these divine certainties! Really, the promise is confirmed with an oath and sealed with the blood of Christ. “Certainly I will be with thee.”

Now this is “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” And Moses, as he comes to die, looks back and remembers it; he proved it then, but he proved it all his journey through. He could speak well of his God. A few verses later he says, “There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun.” There is none like Him. You and I can say the same. There is none like our God, none who would have borne with us like He has. “There is none

like unto the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in His excellency on the sky. The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” Now this is “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” Moses looks back. He knew it then, and he proved it all through his life. He could speak well of God, His faithfulness. As he comes to die, this is it: the good will of God, the wonders of His grace, and he can desire nothing better for those he loves, nothing better for the Israel of God. “The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.”