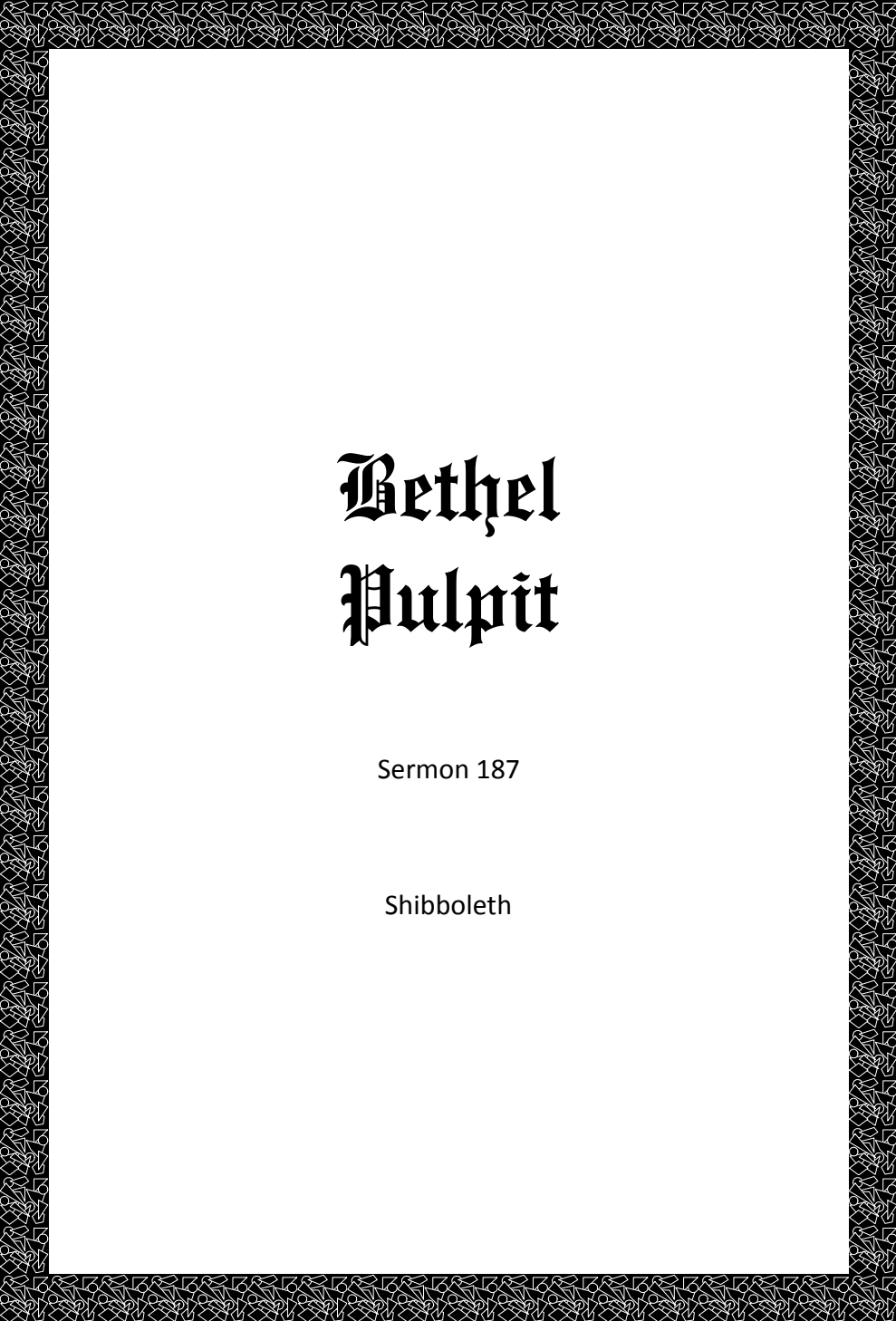




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 187

Shibboleth

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 1st October, 2000**

Text: "*Shibboleth*" (*Judges 12. 6*).

Let me first of all explain the meaning and the background. There was a war between the men of Ephraim and the men of Gilead. A terrible battle took place between the Ephraimites and the Gileadites and the men of Ephraim were completely overthrown. They were trying to escape. They had to cross the River Jordan in a certain place. It seems there was a ford there. It was the only way. They had to cross there. So the Gileadites were waiting for them, but the Ephraimites pretended they were Gileadites. If the question was put to them, "Are you an Ephraimite?" They said, "No." Now there was a perfect test and it was this: an Ephraimite could not pronounce the sound *sh*. An Ephraimite could not frame his lips to say *shibboleth*. A Gileadite could but an Ephraimite could not, so if you asked an Ephraimite to say *shibboleth* (the word *shibboleth* is a simple word meaning stream), he stuttered and stammered and in the end said *sibboleth*. He proved he was not telling the truth; he was an enemy, not a friend. It was vital. So much hung on that word. It was a matter of life and death.

Of course, the point is very simple. You can test a person perhaps by one word. For instance, in the last war if a man said he was not a German, they could put some word to him with the letter *w* in and he could not pronounce the word. He pronounced the *w* like a *v*. His speech betrayed him. If you put me, being a northerner, to the test to try to pronounce some words just in the way they are pronounced here in Luton, even if it were a matter of life and death, I am sure I could not possibly frame to pronounce the words the way you do. So this was a simple test, but it was important; it was vital; it was foolproof.

What are we going to say about this in a spiritual sense, because there is a principle here? I want to make one or two comments at the beginning and then come to the vital point. One thing is this: the awfulness of pretending to be something you are not. "Be sure your sin will find you out," and be sure Almighty God knows whether you are on the right side or the wrong side, because there are only two sides.

Be careful in your speech. "Let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay." In the world there is so much dissembling, not a clear answer, and

sadly, solemnly it is getting even into the church of God, even into our congregations. If a person is asked a question, why can't it be a straight answer, a simple answer?

And then the preaching of the gospel. There is a lot of preaching today and you cannot tell whether it is *shibboleth* or *sibboleth*. "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" You cannot tell whether it is law or gospel, there is such confusion. You remember we read in the Book of Nehemiah, there were so many in Israel, the children of mixed marriages, and they spoke part the language of Zion and part the language of Ashdod. Don't we have this in professed religion today and coming into our own chapels, this confusion of tongues? There is not a certain sound. "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" Now may the trumpet ever speak clearly and distinctly of law and grace, and sin and salvation, and heaven and hell. May it not be an uncertain sound. The Lord deliver us from half the language of Zion and half the language of Ashdod.

But beloved friends, how this rests on my spirit tonight, *shibboleth*, is this: if our religion is right, if your religion and mine is right, there can be certain questions put to us and we will be able to speak clearly. We will not stutter. We will not stammer. We will not try to frame to pronounce it right and get it wrong. With a clear, unwavering tongue we shall be able to say *shibboleth*. I read to you this evening about poor Simon Peter, dear, godly man. Didn't he fall, and didn't he get in bad company? But even when he was amidst that bad company, he could not help speaking the way in which he did speak. They said, "Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee." There is a language that the people of God speak, it is the language of Zion, and they do not just learn it out of the Bible and out of the hymnbook; they learn it by the sacred influence and divine teaching of the Holy Spirit, and their speech will betray them.

And then I read to you that chapter of the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians. Of course, in the context there he was speaking about the gift of tongues. Some were glorying in the gift of tongues. Some were saying it was right and some that it was wrong. Paul said he would that he could speak in tongues more than them all, but he came to this conclusion: "I had rather speak five words with my understanding ... than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." And beloved friends, if your religion and mine is right, is real, there will be certain words, even if it is only five

words, and we shall be able to speak them with the understanding. When we are asked to say *shibboleth*, we will not stutter, we will not stammer, we will not dissemble; we will not come short; we will not say *sibboleth*. It will be with a clear, unwavering voice we shall say *shibboleth*. You say, “Only one word?” Well, they say you can see by a straw which way the wind is blowing.

There were two sides here and these two sides were at enmity with one another. They were at variance with one another. And beloved friends, in the world today there are just two sides. There are only two religions in this world. Some of you young people at school, at college, are studying all this multi-faith, and I do not know how many faiths and religions there are and how many denominations there are. But you know, there are only two: the religion of God and the religion of the devil. There are only two sides: the church and the world; the sheep and the goats. In the last great day there will be that complete separation and it will be an eternal separation. It will be as clear a separation as this here on the banks of Jordan between the Ephraimites and the Gileadites, and the Lord will separate the whole human race as a shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left hand. To the sheep He will say, “Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” And to the goats He will say, “Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” And each one, every one of us here will hear that eternal sentence and it will be the one or it will be the other, and it will be eternal, it will be for ever.

Now these things are very solemn. There were two sides here, and it was being put to the test. It was a clear and definite and certain test, and it separated between the one side and the other, and it was a matter of life or a matter of death. According to the account here, there were many of them who dissembled. They *pretended* they were friends. They *pretended* they were on the right side. They were not really; they were on the wrong side. But they were pretending they were on the right side. There are thousands who pretend they are on the right side, but they never were and you cannot deceive Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire. I believe that there are many who go all the way through life pretending to be among the children of God and they are accepted by the children of God, but when the last great day comes, they will not deceive Him who sits on the great white throne. When the last great judgment day comes, there will be three great

surprises. One will be that there are some who nobody expected to enter heaven who will enter heaven. That will be the first surprise. The second surprise: there will be many who everyone expected to enter heaven and they never will enter heaven. That will be the second surprise. O and the third great surprise will be this: if you and I at last hear that sentence, “Come, ye blessed of My Father.” That will be the greatest of all surprises. It will be a wonderful mercy to be safely landed, won’t it? But to hear that word, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Wasn’t it good “Rabbi” Duncan who said, “I am afraid if the Lord says that to me, I will have to contradict Him, if He calls *me* a good and faithful servant at the great day”?

There were just two sides here, the Ephraimites and the Gileadites, and it was life for one and death for the other. Some pretended they were on the right side and they were on the wrong side. There was this test. It was only a small thing, but it was infallible. Either they stood the test or they failed in it. Well, God has His *shibboleth*. He puts it to each one of us tonight. I wonder how many of us with an unwavering voice can speak out and say, *shibboleth*, or are we going to stutter and stammer and try to disguise our words and not be able to come up with the right word, the right pronunciation?

I want to speak of one or two of these *shibboleths*, and the first I want to speak to you this evening is the word *eternity*. Can you pronounce that word aright?

“Eternity, tremendous sound!
To guilty souls a dreadful wound;
But O, if Christ and heaven be mine,
How sweet the accents, how divine!”

Before us each there is a never-ending eternity. By nature we hear of it, we may speak of it, we may sing of it; but when the Lord begins His solemn, separating work to put us on the right side, to make us a Gileadite, not an Ephraimite, then we can say, *shibboleth*. We can answer to that word, *eternity*. We do know it is a tremendous sound. We have felt its awfulness in our heart and conscience. We have trembled before it. We have not said, “It doesn’t matter.” It is not something we can pass by, take for granted. *Shibboleth*. Can you speak that with an unwavering tongue? Can you say that word, *eternity*, in the light of God’s holiness, in the light of Holy Scripture, with a tender conscience? Can you speak that word

eternity? O the awfulness, the solemnity of it, for ever and ever! Eternity, eternity, where shall I spend eternity? Now can you say *shibboleth* there, or do you mispronounce it? Do you stutter? Do you stumble? Do you stammer? Do you only say, *sibboleth*? Do you understand what eternity means? *Shibboleth*. It is a solemn thing if we cannot come right there on this vital point, this tremendous sound, this awful word, *eternity*.

Another *shibboleth* is *sin*. Perhaps you say, “Everyone can say that. Everyone can pronounce it. It is just a little word of three letters. It is one of the easiest words in the English language to read, to say.” Now can you *really* answer *shibboleth*? Can you really stand this test? What does sin mean to you? Is it just a little word of three letters? Is it no more than that? Is it your burden? Is it your care? Is the great point with you that your sin might be for ever pardoned, for ever put away? Is it your desire that all your sin, all your guilt might be removed? Because if you and I die with one single sin unpardoned, we are lost for ever. Can you say *shibboleth* on this great point? You see sin on a battle field. You see sin in some of these dreadful disasters we have had. You see sin in an air crash. You see sin as a body is carried to a cemetery. But do you see sin in your own heart? Can you say *shibboleth* here, or do you stutter and stumble? Do you say, “That is just what people believe, but really in my heart of hearts I am not really so bad. I am not as bad as other people. There are some things I do wrong and other things I don’t do wrong. I admit I am not perfect”? Sin. Can you say *shibboleth* to it? Some of you may have read of that rather remarkable man, the converted Jew, Adolph Sapphir. Under strange circumstances many Jews in Hungary were brought to a knowledge of the truth. Later, Sapphir became an eminent minister in London and once to his congregation he quoted that word,

“The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, as vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.”

And he said, “The majority of our congregations do not mean a word they sing. They sing those words, but what they mean in their hearts is, ‘There may I, *less* vile than he, wash my *few* sins away.’” Now can you say *shibboleth* on this great point, as the Holy Scriptures reveal the awfulness of sin, worthy of divine condemnation, as the Holy Scriptures set out the mystery of iniquity?

There was a time at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Calvin's Geneva was sunk in wickedness and apostasy, though there was plenty of religion. A man called Haldane went to Geneva with nothing but a Bible in his hand. He began with the students and began to read through the Epistle to the Romans and expounded it. One of those students was D'Aubigné, whose writings I think most of you have read. As Haldane was opening up the first chapter to the Romans, the depravity of human nature, suddenly D'Aubigné said, "I can see it in Holy Scripture, the depravity of human nature." Haldane said, "Can you see it in your own heart?" Can you say *shibboleth* here? "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Now another *shibboleth*. I wonder how many of you can pronounce it, frame it aright, not stutter over it and stumble and get it wrong. *Grace*, the unmerited, matchless, free favour of our God in Christ. Now can you speak it? Can you frame it? These are not a few little stories and things. To these who were put to the test, say *shibboleth*, if they could say it they were saved, but if they could not say it, if they stumbled, made a mistake, it was immediate death, and forty-two thousand of them perished. They could not speak it aright. There are more than forty-two thousand in England today who cannot frame to pronounce it aright. These are not just interesting things or religious things or things that do not matter. It is death or life, heaven or hell that hangs on this, on the word *grace*. Can you speak it? It is in our Bible, in our hymnbook. We sing, "Sovereign grace o'er sin abounding," but have you been brought by the Holy Spirit here, that if I am saved it must be all of grace from first to last? It is to see the wonderful love of the Lord Jesus. It is to realise what an amazing thing it is. It is to realise the value of it. Grace as it shines in the face of the Lord Jesus. Grace as it is displayed in His Person and finished work. It is that point, that salvation is free, that grace is free, that you and I can do nothing, that God must do everything. O beloved friends, that word *grace*, can you speak it aright? Can you say *shibboleth*, or do you not realise your true need of grace and do you not realise the true preciousness of grace? Let me just quote one Scripture. Can you say *shibboleth* to it? Does it touch your heart? Does it move you or does it leave you cold? "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich." Now can you say *shibboleth* to that? Can you say, "This is all my salvation. This is all my desire. Apart from this I have no hope"? It must be all of grace. These are vital things. These are matters of life and death.

Now then, another *shibboleth*: *blood*. O what can you say concerning the precious, precious, precious blood of Christ that cleanseth from all sin? Can you say *shibboleth* there? You are not going to stumble and stutter and say *sibboleth* on this, are you? O the sweet attraction there is in the blood of Christ shed at Calvary, shed for sinners, that precious blood that cleanses from all sin, that blood which brings forgiveness, pardon, that blood which fits and prepares for heaven! “The blood of Christ, how sweet it sounds, to cleanse and heal the sinner’s wounds!” Now can you say *shibboleth* to that? It is all my hope. It is all my desire. It is all my plea. Have you ever come to this point: there is nothing between your soul and a deserved hell but the blood of Christ, that precious, precious blood? Every sinner saved by grace can say *shibboleth* there. Not concerning a felt, personal interest in it, but that the blood is my only hope, my only foundation, my only plea. If ever I reach heaven at last, it must be on this ground, the blood of Christ, and no other ground. Can you say *shibboleth* to the blood of Christ? Those who live and die with no interest in the blood of Christ must be lost eternally.

Let me bring yet one more *shibboleth* before you. The great *shibboleth*, the vital *shibboleth*, can you say it, can you pronounce it aright? *Christ*. Eternity – sin – grace – blood – Christ. What do these things mean to you? We put that word of the Lord Jesus concerning Calvary in a slightly different sense: “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?” These words, these *shibboleths*, “Are they nothing to you, all ye that pass by?” Or are there some of you, you have to say, “These words are everything to me”? “If ever my poor soul be saved, ’tis Christ must be the way.” O that great *shibboleth*! Now can you speak that word *Christ* with an unwavering tongue? Can you say, “Thou, O Christ, art all I want”? Can you say, “Give me Christ, or else I die”? That is the great *shibboleth*.

Really, in scriptural words it is this: “What think ye of Christ?” That is the great question. It is by our answer to that we must be judged, saved or lost. “What think ye of Christ?” Why, in that chapter they came, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees. They asked many questions of the Lord Jesus and He most graciously answered them, and then when they were all silent He said, “What think ye of Christ?” I remember when I was a teenage boy, out with some other boys, no thought of God or godliness, a crowd of people, and there was a quiet little man standing alone with a placard with just those words on it: “What think ye of Christ?” Now it pierced me through and through. I do not think it was really gracious or a

true Holy Ghost conviction, but it pierced me through and through. “What think ye of Christ?” It is the great question. Can you answer it? Can you say *shibboleth* to it? Can you say, “‘What think ye of Christ?’ – Well, apart from Christ, no hope for such a sinner as me. He is my only hope, my only plea, my only foundation. ‘Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on Thee’”?

O beloved friends, these are vital things, vital questions. This is the test. This is what marks you, whether you are among the people of God or the world, whether you are a Gileadite or an Ephraimite, whether you are saved or lost, whether it is heaven or hell, if you can say *shibboleth* to the truth as in Jesus.

Let me remind you where this took place. It all took place at the passage of Jordan. They had come down to the River Jordan and it was there that the great question was put, say *shibboleth*, and they could not; they said *sibboleth*. You and I likewise must come down to the River Jordan, the Jordan of death. “How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” In these words here, “How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” the great question is put to you: “Can you say *shibboleth*?” I believe there are a few here who know the answer to that. What is the answer?

“In that dread moment, O to hide
Beneath His sheltering blood!
'Twill Jordan's icy waves divide,
And land my soul with God.”

That will bring you safe through the passages of Jordan. No Ephraimite or Gileadite will be able to keep you out. It will land you safe on Canaan's side. O but to go down to the swellings of Jordan! “How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” “If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses?” What does that mean? Well, if little things have been too much for you, what will these great things be for you? “If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” What does that mean? If life has been too much for you, what will death be? Each one of us will come down to the swellings of Jordan.

“The Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were

escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth.” Can you answer these questions in the gospel catechism? “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?” “Unto you therefore which believe He is precious.” Is He precious to you? “What think ye of Christ?” “Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.”

It will be your mercy and mine to be born again of the Holy Spirit, blessed with repentance and faith, fleeing for refuge to the hope set before us in Jesus, graciously prepared, made ready, made right, not taking it for granted. It is life or death. It is heaven or hell. O to be enabled by the Spirit of God to say *shibboleth* and that it might stand in the swellings of Jordan, that it might stand when we appear before the judgment seat. May it be your prayer and mine to be able to pronounce this word aright.

There is a word in one of our little hymns on this point which has kept hovering around my spirit and I thought how applicable to this word *shibboleth*. It is speaking about some of the blessed language the people of God speak. How we can apply it to this word *shibboleth*, and this prayer:

“Dear Saviour, help us now to seek,
And grant Thy Spirit’s power;
That we may all this language speak,
Before the dying hour.”

Beloved friends, through the mercy of God may each of us be able to say *shibboleth*.