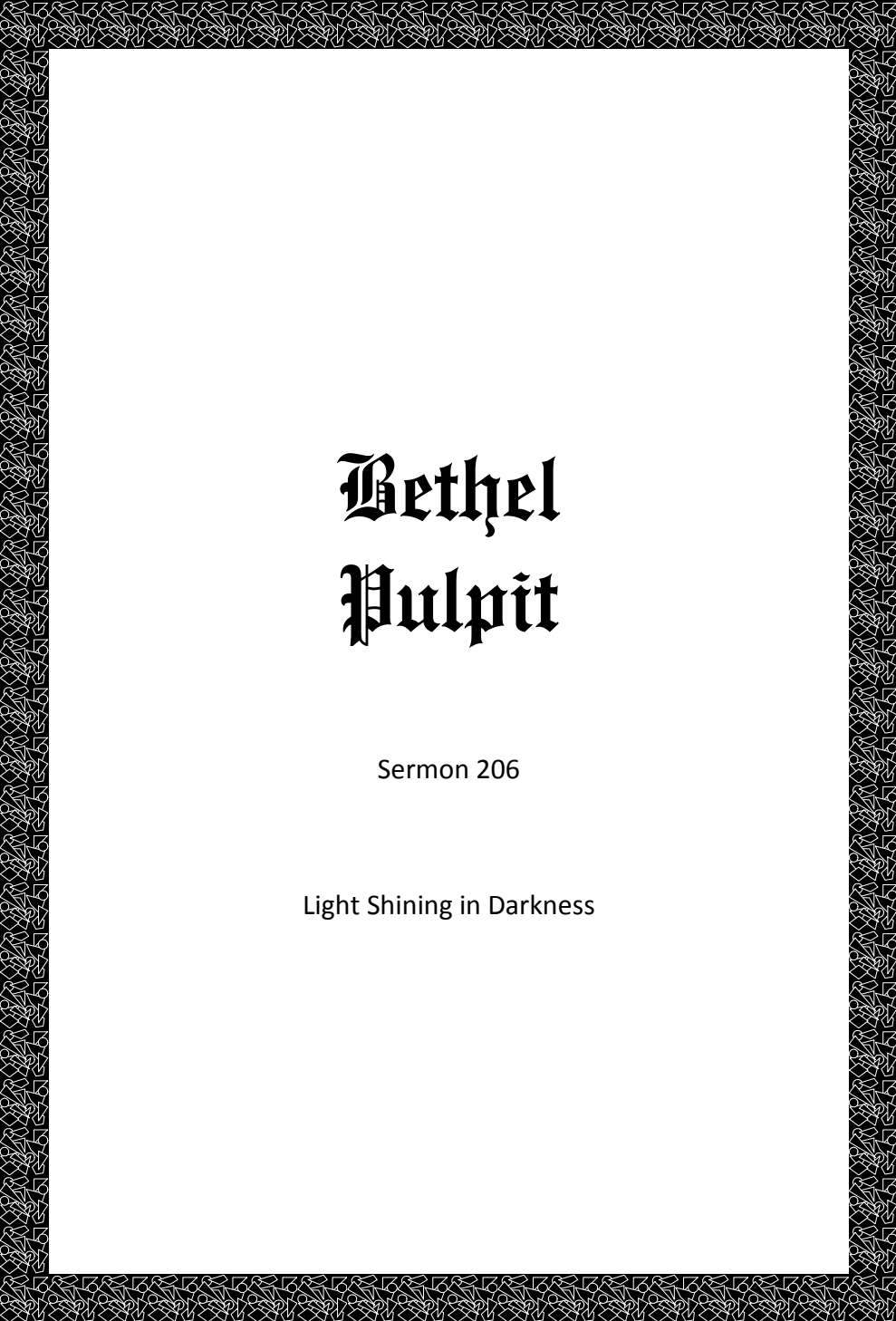




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 206

Light Shining in Darkness

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 26th May, 2002**

Text: *“For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Malachi 3. 6).*

This was an exceedingly dark day when Malachi prophesied. When you read through these closing verses in the Old Testament, there seems to be a thick gloom resting over everything. Evils in the nation, God's judgments, trouble, sin, sorrow – there seems to be this darkness, there seems to be this terrible gloom. And then suddenly the Lord speaks and reminds us who He is. He says, “I am the Lord.” In other words, I am still God; I am still Almighty; I am still on the throne; I am still in control. And that is the answer, the only answer. “I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” In all this gloom and darkness, it is just like a beam of divine light that shines from heaven, that God is still there, still in control.

Well, beloved friends, if it was a dark and gloomy day when Malachi lived, how much more so today! *Then* the canon of the Old Testament was coming to an end. *Then* there was going to be that long wait before the promised Messiah should come. *Now* we are living in solemn, latter days. *Now* we are waiting for the Lord's returning at the end of all things. O but the darkness, the gloom that covers the earth, the wickedness, the evil, the sorrow, as if the powers of hell are let loose. And it is not just that. As you come to the house of God this morning, there are so many of you and you have the clouds, the dark clouds in your own lives personally, and you look around in the church of God, you look around in your family, you look around in the earth, you look within your own heart, you look at your circumstances, and there you see this gloom, this darkness. O but to hear that voice from heaven, “I am the Lord” – still God, still the Lord, still on the throne, still in control. “I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” O it is that ray of light which shines from heaven through all the darkness, the voice of God, the knowledge that God is still there, the sweet assurance that He is still unchanging, the sweet assurance that He is still with His people, the sweet assurance that He still loves them with an everlasting love, the sweet assurance that He will still deliver them in the trying hour.

“For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Perhaps some of you this week have been feeling the darkness. You open the newspapers – well, the darkness. You look around in the church of God – the darkness. You look on your own things, your own circumstances – the darkness. O that this light from heaven which here shines in the Word of God might shine in your heart, that you might sweetly prove that “still in Thy unchanging Word, a beam of comfort shines.” This light shining in darkness. You have it again before the Old Testament ends. “Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.” That sweet promise to the church of God in days of darkness and distress; that sweet promise to the Lord’s people when they walk in darkness and have no light; that sweet promise to the Lord’s people with the cloud before them. “Unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings.” And then all the dark clouds will be dispelled. The Sun of righteousness shall arise.

So however dark the cloud of a believer, there is always the bow in the cloud. This is the bow in Malachi’s cloud and this is the bow in the church’s cloud today. “I am the Lord, I change not.” The Lord says, “When I bring a cloud over the earth” – it does not come by accident; it does not come by chance; it comes at the right time. “When I bring a cloud over the earth, ... the bow shall be seen in the cloud ... and I will look upon it.” O the tokens of God’s faithfulness!

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

Despite all the sins of His people, the token of God’s mercy, the token of His faithfulness, the token of His covenant of grace. O to find that resting place, that light shining in darkness. “Although my house be not so with God.” Well perhaps your house is not so with God this morning as you wish it. As you look in your heart, or as you look in your circumstances, or as you look forward to the future, or look around in your life, you have to say, “not so with God” – not as I would have it. “Yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although He make it not to grow.” These are real things. This is light shining in darkness.

“I am the Lord, I change not.” This is the bow in the cloud. “When I bring a cloud over the earth, ... the bow shall be seen in the cloud ... and I will look upon it.” Never forget when you look at the rainbow, the Lord is looking at it, and never forget when you are *not* looking at the rainbow, the Lord is looking at it. Do not forget in the Book of the Revelation that wonderful, pictorial representation of the everlasting throne of God in heaven; it is completely surrounded by the rainbow. What does that mean? That the Lord is completely encircled, completely bound up by His covenant mercy and covenant faithfulness. O this light shining in darkness! William Cowper entitled his beautiful hymn, “Light shining out of darkness.”

“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

“His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.”

“For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” So there is the picture, but it is a dark picture; it is a gloomy picture. But then there is this beam of light which shines forth from heaven, shines right through the darkness, and today may it shine right into our hearts. “I am the Lord.” The Lord breaks the silence. The Lord speaks. The Lord graciously reminds us who He is. “I am the Lord” – not a man that I should lie, or the son of man that I should repent.

“I am the Lord.” Well, there are various occasions when the church of God has been in trouble and the Lord has reminded them who He is. Let me give you another instance. Jeremiah, the city besieged, no hope for the future, everything going wrong, captivity, bondage. “Behold, *I am the Lord*” – the very same word we have here, and there God adds this: “the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for Me?” Is there? “Is there any thing too hard for Me?” “I am the Lord, I change not.” That means that He is still there. “I change not.” That means He is still with His people. “I change not.” That means He is still on the throne. “I change not.” “I am the Lord, I change not.” So may there be that beam of heavenly light this morning shining through the darkness, and may we see

that the Lord is still on the throne; the Lord still is almighty; the Lord still is in control.

“I am the Lord, I change not.” Now what does it mean? Well, it means one or two things. It means that He does all things according to the counsel of His will. It means that nothing can ever take place by chance or accident. It means that He controls the rise and falls of empires as much as the crushing of a moth and the falling of a sparrow. In a word it means, “My life’s minutest circumstance is subject to His eye.” It means, “My times are in Thy hand.” It means, “All must come, and last, and end, as shall please my heavenly Friend.” “I am the Lord, I change not” – still in control, still Almighty, still on the throne.

Now what else does it mean? It means this: He is almighty to deliver. “Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.” It means He sits upon the throne of grace, the mercyseat sprinkled with blood. It means that it is His delight to answer the prayers of His people. “I am the Lord, I change not.” “The Lord sitteth upon the flood; yea, the Lord sitteth King for ever.” It is not a precarious throne. There will never be a time when a poor soul comes to seek the Lord’s help and He is not there, or His throne has been vacated, or He is asleep, or anything like that. “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” “He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” O that this morning with all our various concerns personally and in the church of God, in the nation and in the world, we might hear this word of divine authority, this majestic word, this word of divine sovereignty, this word sounding out from the throne: “I am the Lord,” He who is God from everlasting to everlasting.

“I am the Lord, I change not.” Now what else does it mean? He is still with His people. “For He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” “He will never, never leave us; nor will let us quite leave Him.” The Lord’s gracious presence with His people at all times, and especially in the house of God in their solemn assemblies, and especially in the time of sorrow, in the time of need. “I am the Lord, I change not.” O this beam of heavenly light shining forth, shining in our midst, shining in the Word. May it be shining in our hearts. Almighty God speaking, still on the throne, still in charge, still in control. So may He send us help from the sanctuary as He has kindly promised, and strengthen us out of Zion.

“For I am the Lord, I change not.” If He is eternally the same in His omnipotence, His divine, almighty power, the same now as when He

created the world, then His love and His mercy are still the same. “For I am the Lord, I change not.” He still loves His people with an everlasting love. He still remembers them in their low estate because His mercy endureth for ever. He still says what we read this morning: “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 them.” “I am the Lord” – the Lord who sees, the Lord who hears, the Lord who knows, the Lord who comes down, the Lord who delivers. This great God, almighty, omnipotent, but this great God merciful and gracious who loves His people with an everlasting love.

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Now beloved friends, there are many, many lessons we can learn from the immutability of God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, God unchanging, God unchangeable; many lessons we can learn from this majestic declaration when He sovereignly declares who He is: “I am the Lord.” But just this one thing the Lord Himself especially picks out. He says, “Therefore” – because of all this – “ye sons of Jacob are not consumed,” because the Lord does not change. If the Lord did change, the sons of Jacob would be consumed. It is like that poor old woman who one day said to John Newton, “I am sure the Lord must have chosen me before I was born, because if He had seen me afterwards, He would not have chosen me.” I know her doctrine and theology were a bit mixed up, but you know what the poor old woman meant. “They who once His kindness prove, find it everlasting love.”

Now when the Lord has a purpose of mercy toward a poor, lost, ruined, unworthy sinner, that purpose of mercy must be fulfilled. “I am the Lord, I change not.” “God is not a man, that He should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent: hath He said, and shall He not do it?” The purpose of God toward a sinner finds him lost, ruined in his sin and guilt, teaches him his need of a Saviour, brings him to rest his only hope on Christ that Saviour. Now, “The work begun is carried on, nor hell can it deface.” “I am the Lord, I change not.” Where the Lord sets His love on a sinner, He loves him to all eternity. “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” That is why the Lord brought His people safely into the land of Canaan, why Israel was brought safely through the wilderness into

Canaan, because God says, “I am the Lord, I change not.” If He had changed His mind, He would either have sent them all back to Egypt, or let them all perish in the wilderness. “I am the Lord, I change not.” In the Book of Life, the names of His chosen are all written. There is no change in the purposes of God. How often we read of someone, and he has had such a good intention, but that man changes his mind. He says, “I have had second thoughts.” God never has second thoughts. “He is in one mind, and who can turn Him? and what His soul desireth, even that He doeth.”

“The work begun is carried on,
Nor hell can it deface;
The whole elect with Christ are one
And must be saved by grace.”

You have the everlasting security, the everlasting salvation of the people of God here. That sinner loved with an eternal love, that sinner in whose heart the Lord has begun, he can never be destroyed, never be consumed. He must reach heaven. Why? Because the Lord’s purpose is unchangeable. He can never be deflected from His purpose. He can never change His mind. The Lord will perfect that which concerneth you. “His mercy endureth for ever.” So in a word it is this:

“I’ve bound thee up secure,
’Midst all the rage of hell;
The curse thou never shalt endure” – why?
“For I’m unchangeable.”

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore” – because God can never change His purpose – “therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Beloved friends, this to me this morning seems a beautiful word, just these two words: “not consumed.” Now in the great day, that will be written over against the whole blood-bought church of God: “not consumed.” Also this word will be written over against every sinner saved by grace: “not consumed.”

So I read to you that beautiful account of the burning bush (Exodus chapter 3). Moses was in the wilderness, in the backside of the desert. He was attending Jethro his father-in-law’s sheep. He said, “I will now turn aside, and see this great sight.” The bush should have burned out, but it kept on burning. “The bush burned with fire, and the bush was not

consumed.” That was the emblem of the Church of Scotland in its best days, the emblem of the godly Covenanters. If ever a people were hunted and hounded to persecution, martyrdom and death, it was the Scottish Covenanters, but they still had their motto, the burning bush. “Not consumed.” And that belongs to the whole blood-bought church of God: “not consumed.

O but a child of God fears that he will be consumed, and sometimes he thinks he must be consumed, and at times he realises he deserves to be consumed. But the Lord says, “not consumed.” The word is as certain as that in creation, “Let there be light: and there was light.” “Not consumed.” You fear at times you will be consumed by your own lusts and your own sins, your own temptations. “Not consumed.” We are “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” And you think at times that Satan will consume you. He never will; he never can. Haman never hanged a single Jew upon his gallows, but he was hanged upon it himself.

“Not consumed.” Perhaps especially at times as a sinner you fear lest the wrath of God shall consume you. “Out of Christ, almighty power can do nothing but devour.” “For our God is a consuming fire.” As a sinner you fear at times lest the wrath of God against sin shall consume you. “Not consumed.” O but to see that, to see it in the cross of Christ, to see it at Calvary, when divine vengeance which must have destroyed a thousand worlds fell in all its weight on the head of the Saviour and it spent itself there. It could never consume a single sinner in whose place the great Surety suffered, bled and died. O but you see it at Calvary, the whole church of God having an interest in the sin-atoning sufferings and death of Jesus. “Not consumed.”

“Jesus, arrayed in mortal form,
Of whom the prophets tell,
On His dear head, O what a storm
Of awful vengeance fell!”

O but “not consumed.” “He bore it for a chosen race, and thus became their Hiding-place.”

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” At times God’s people fear they will be consumed, swallowed up by their sorrows and their troubles and their afflictions. “Not

consumed.” “I am the Lord, I change not.” That means I am still with thee to help thee, to deliver thee, to bless thee, to bring thee through. “Not consumed.”

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” We stand in wonder and amazement at a word like this, and then we learn the secret. “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.” Now that is the ground on which you will not be consumed, the ground on which you will never be consumed. “It is of the Lord’s mercies.” Now do not forget, Jeremiah wrote that. If ever a man had sorrow and distress it was Jeremiah. “Not consumed.” “Though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion.” “Not consumed.” “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.” “I am the Lord, I change not.” My mercies change not; My compassions change not. It is because of those mercies, because of those compassions that we are “not consumed.” Compassion is a wonderful thing, even human, even natural compassion, natural understanding, natural sympathy. And then we come to Scripture and we read that the Lord is “full of compassion,” and we have that beautiful illustration, the good Samaritan. He had compassion, and came right where the wounded man was, and did everything for him. That is the way the Lord will deal with you. “Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning.” That means they are there tomorrow as well as today. That means they change not. “Great is Thy faithfulness.”

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

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Well perhaps the most striking instance was when the three Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were thrown into the burning fiery furnace and it was so fierce it even destroyed those who threw them in. “Not consumed.” Not one hair of their heads consumed. Do you believe that? “The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.” The only thing that was consumed were the bonds that held them fast. “Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? ... Lo, I see four men loose,

walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”

“’Tis expressed in words like these:

‘I am with thee,
Israel, passing through the fire.’”

Now, “not consumed.” “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.” “I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” O that wonderful promise (I first felt it over fifty years ago): “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee.” And it came with such weight and authority and power, the vast difference between an almighty God and a poor, weak, helpless sinner. “I will be with thee” – to see it in Christ. “And through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.”

“The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Now just a word on the “sons of Jacob,” who they are, because the promise belongs to them. Well of course, they are the people of God. But I do find this attractive, that God’s people are spoken of as the “sons of Jacob.” Not the sons of Abraham; he was the stalwart in faith. Not the sons of Joseph; you do not find a visible fault in Joseph. Not the sons of David, the man after God’s own heart. If ever there was a weak, helpless, guilty sinner, it was Jacob. He was continually faltering, continually falling, yet the Lord loved him. “Jacob have I loved.” And God, Almighty God, this great God calls Himself the God of Jacob – the God of all grace, the God of poor, weak, helpless, perishing sinners. “The Lord of hosts is with us.” That is the mighty God. He is the Lord of hosts of angels, hosts of devils, hosts of circumstances. “The Lord of hosts is with us.” Do not forget He is the God of Jacob. “The God of Jacob is our Refuge.” What a mercy that, and to view it in Christ.

“Dear Refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise,
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies.”

“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge.”

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Now look at Jacob himself, how the Lord was with him. He was under the shadow of the Almighty. He was under the shadow of a Father’s love. He was under the Lord’s gracious protection. He was under the Lord’s mysterious providence. You can write this against Jacob’s whole life: “not consumed.” And didn’t he have some deep sorrows, and didn’t he go through some deep waters, and weren’t there some flames? “Not consumed.” Therefore ye sons of Jacob, ye are no more consumed than your father was. O but a son of Jacob, a sinner who seeks the Lord. Now are there any sons of Jacob here, those of you who seek the Lord, of necessity you seek the Lord? You want Him to bless your soul. You seek Him to forgive you, to cleanse you in His precious blood. The seeking seed of Jacob, He never said to them, “Seek ye Me in vain.” You seek His help. You seek that He will be with you. You seek that He will support you. You seek that He will bless you. Are there these seeking souls here? It is the seeking seed of Jacob, unworthy, sinful, but the God of Jacob, the God of all grace.

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Beloved friends, what a sure, solid foundation we have here. We can rest on it. It will never let us down; it will never give way. We can venture forward into the unknown way resting on this foundation.

“The ground feels firm and good;
And, lest we should mistake the way,
He lines it out with blood.”

“I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”