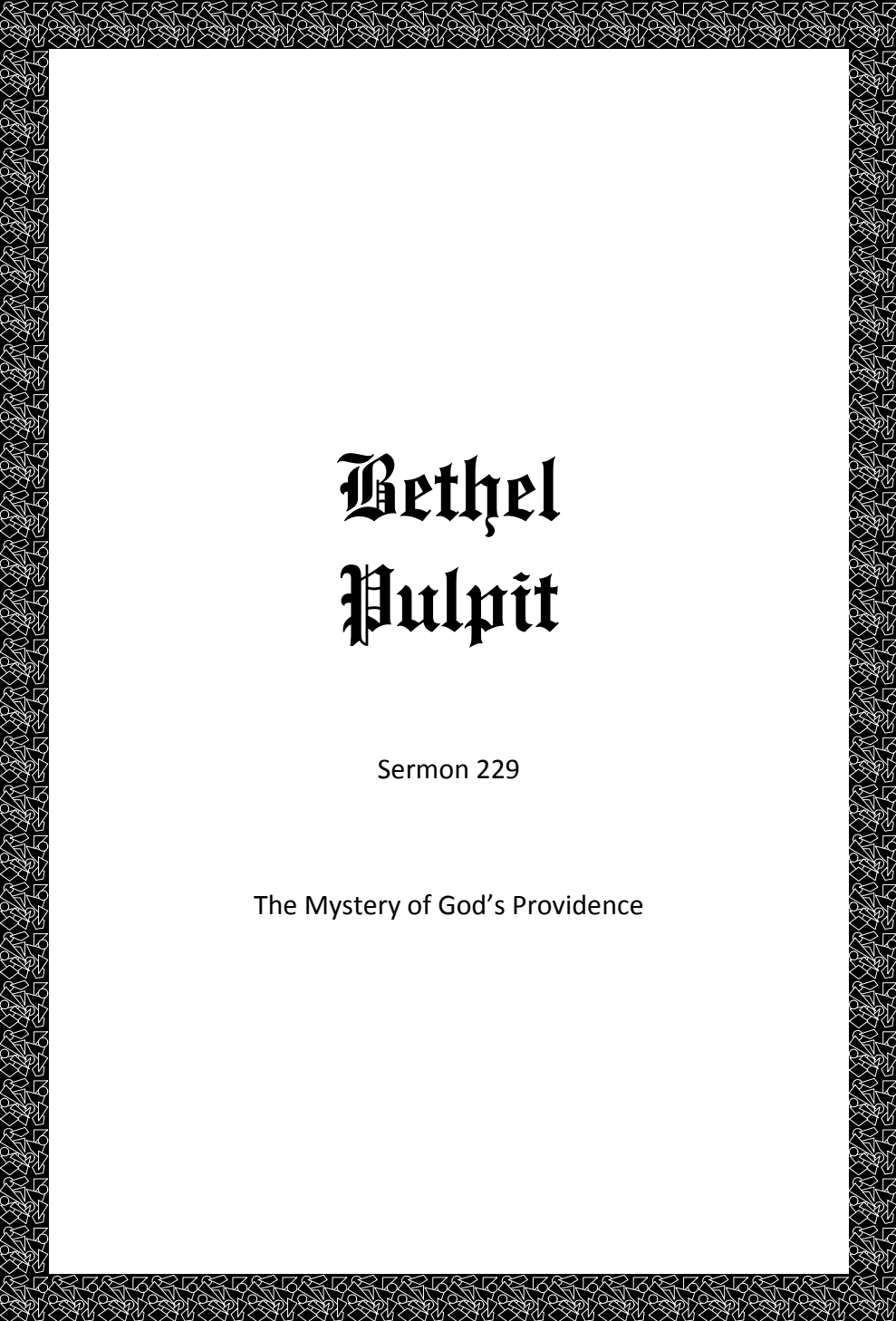




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 229

The Mystery of God's Providence

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 22nd August, 2004**

Text: *"Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2. 10.)*

The Book of Job is a most remarkable Book. There is not any book like it in Scripture. It deals with the mystery of divine providence. It deals with the problem of human suffering, especially the suffering of the righteous. So you have this man Job with trial after trial, affliction after affliction, though he is counted an honourable and worthy child of God. And the point is why, why should this happen? Really, the Book of Job does not come to a conclusion on this. I think if there is a conclusion at all to the Book of Job it is this: that God is so great and high and holy and we are both so sinful on the one hand and so dim of sight on the other hand that how can we expect to understand the reason for God's dealings with men here upon earth? He gives no account of His matters. His way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters, and His footsteps are not known. But in this sentence that I have read out now there is a partial answer to that question, why is it that Job should suffer? Why is it that God's people should suffer? "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" In other words, we are unworthy, we are undeserving, yet we receive so many blessings, so many favours. So should we not expect that there will be dark days as well as bright days, that there will be sorrows as well as joy, that there will be pain as well as comfort? Isn't this only reasonable, if we have some little knowledge of what God is and who we are?

One thing is clear, that though Job cannot altogether understand why these things should happen to him, shall I say he springs to the defence of Almighty God when the devil turns accuser against him? You see the bitterness of Job's trial was that Satan used Job's wife to accuse him, to tempt him. It must have been a wonderful thing that when Job lost everything, all his property and all his family, his wife was still left to him. But she did not prove a blessing to him. She proved the opposite. "Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die." Now that is one thing that God had told Satan that Job would never do. He would never curse God. It is very interesting that Satan's power is limited. He can do no more than what God allows. He had to ask

permission first to afflict Job in his property and then he had to ask God's permission to afflict Job in his body, and even then there was a hedge: thus far and no further; touch not his life. After this Job cursed the day of his birth; he "cursed his day." But he never cursed his God. "Then said his wife unto him ... curse God, and die," which most have taken to be a temptation to suicide. Job, it is the end of everything. There is no future for you. It is nothing but darkness and despair. "Curse God, and die." "But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips."

One thing is made very clear, that Satan is a real person, not just an influence, not just someone's imagination, not just poetical language. Satan is a real person and he hates God and His people and His ways, and he afflicts and he seeks to destroy. He is a fearful enemy, a fearful foe. The wonderful thing is that God is greater than Satan. It is not Satan who reigns; it is God. It is not Satan who is on the throne; it is God. It is not Satan who is almighty; it is God. Ever since the world was created there has been this conflict between God and the devil, and at last Almighty God will be victorious, *and* His people.

There is comfort for the people of God in the Book of Job. What comfort? Whatever sorrow there is does not mean it is a mark of God's disfavour. I remember when I was a young believer, in my native town, Haslingden, one Saturday morning walking down the main road I heard a voice call for me, and I turned round and there was an old man. He was (would you say?) the leading man, the president, at the church in Haslingden that practised faith healing. I stopped and waited for him and said, "How are you?" He said, "I am in the depths of sorrow." I said, "Why? What is the matter?" He said, "I am dreadfully ill. I have a bad heart and I feel dreadfully ill." He said, "At our place of worship they are beginning to cut me off. They are beginning to say I must be an unbeliever, or if not an unbeliever, a backslider. It must be because of some great sin I have committed that I am feeling so ill." I thought, "This is poor comfort for a man in the depths of sorrow." So I tried to speak to him along the lines of the Book of Job – this godly man Job, yet God permitted him to suffer. "O," he said, "I am pleased to meet you. What you have said about the Book of Job has been a comfort to me."

Well, let us try to look at this word a little closer. “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” So first of all, Job makes this simple statement that God’s people receive good at His hand. Well of course, everyone does, the whole world does. The rain falls on the righteous and the wicked. The sun shines on the godly and the ungodly. “Thou openest Thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.” So in a sense it is true of all. But in a special sense the people of God. “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” Now what cause of gratitude we have. God is great and holy. We are weak and sinful and helpless. Yet the good we receive from the hand of a gracious God. Now may that lead us on the one hand to true thanksgiving and may it also lead us to true repentance. May there be many times in our life when we consider that what good we have ever known, that we have ever received, is from the hand of a good and gracious God. “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” And with holy gratitude and true thanksgiving we acknowledge that we do.

Well then, what are these good things that God’s people receive from the hand of their God? We can only name them. First of all, the gospel. O what a good thing that is that the Lord’s people receive, the good news of salvation for the chief of sinners, a once-crucified, now risen, exalted Saviour. “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” And blessed be God in this dark, evil, solemn day we still have the gospel, and what a blessing it is! “Good news of salvation, through Jesus the Lamb.” “The blood of Christ, how sweet it sounds, to cleanse and heal the sinner’s wounds!” How privileged we are! How many parts of the world still do not have the gospel! In past ages how much of our own country did not have the gospel! But the Lord in love and mercy has blessed us with the gospel and the preaching of the gospel and the ministry of the gospel.

“What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” Now what else? The Word of God, God’s holy Word. O what a good Word it is and what a good and gracious gift it is, that we have the Word of God, the Word of God’s grace, which is able to build us up, and to give us an inheritance among all them which are sanctified! “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” What else? Every blessing in providence, every comfort we enjoy, our food and health and warmth and shelter and families and friends, whatever we have. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” O what cause for

gratitude! And one of our great sins is this base ingratitude, to take these things for granted. The supply of every need, these things day by day, how we take them for granted! What would we do if the Lord exercised His own right to withhold them?

“What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” What else? The throne of grace, the blood-sprinkled mercy seat, the privilege of prayer. And so we might go on, all these good things that a good and gracious God bestows upon unworthy sinners. We do not deserve them, but how grateful we should be for them! How often we are ungrateful! How often it is base ingratitude! Good Joseph Swain in one of our hymns (which is seldom sung) says this:

“To Him every comfort we owe,
Above what the fiends have in hell;
And shall we not sing as we go,
That Jesus does everything well?”

“What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” O but to come to this: a Father’s love in Christ; and the dear Saviour, His matchless love, His precious blood, His glorious righteousness, His divine protection; the Holy Ghost, His divine teaching. O but it is salvation, it is heaven at last. “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God?” And we need to stop often and pause and think and consider these things, that we do not deserve them. So often we are ungrateful for them.

“What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” Well, does it not seem reasonable in the light of what God is and in the light of what we are that we should not have unmixed happiness, unmixed pleasure? We sin against God; we despise His benefits; we are unthankful for them; and then when they are withdrawn or some sorrow comes instead of some joy, how ready our hearts are to murmur and complain! But is it not right, is it not only to be expected, is God unrighteous, is God ungracious?

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” Let us be clear, God is not the author of evil in the sense of wickedness or moral evil. We have a word like this: “Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” It seems a dreadful word; it rather startles us at first. “Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” The word *evil* I take to be used here in the sense of affliction, and the

word *good* in the sense of comfort. Shall we receive our comforts from God's hand, and shall we not at times also receive affliction? I want to make that point abundantly clear: it is not moral good and it is not moral evil. These afflictions and sorrows are spoken of as *evil* because they are that to us, but it is not as if there is any wrong or wickedness or fault with God. Forbidden be the thought!

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” Well, as we consider these things, this is only reasonable, and God has never promised His people two heavens, one in this life and one hereafter. It will ever be,

“With mercy and with judgment,
My web of time He wove,
And aye the dews of sorrow
Were lusted with His love.”

This is God's own appointment.

Perhaps the great work on trouble and affliction is Thomas Boston's *Crook in the Lot*. If you read that godly man's life, if ever a man knew trouble and affliction, he did. I think the basis of his thesis, the text he takes is, “Who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked?” And he says, to explain the word *crooked*, it is if something is partly straight and partly not straight. He says that is the way the Lord leads His people. Often it is a crooked way. Then, “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”

Well then, when these things come in our little lives, unexpected sorrows, troubles, difficulties, trials, afflictions, disappointments, what is our attitude to be to them? Well first of all, an attitude of submission. “He cannot do but what is right, and must be righteous still.” To see that it is the all-wise God, that He makes no mistakes in His divine appointment. These things do not come by chance; they fall out of the lap of divine providence. God makes no mistakes. Now the way of the people of God is a way of submission. “We cannot, Lord, Thy purpose see, but all is well that's done by Thee.” We think of all the good we have received. Then should we not also receive evil? It is from the hand of an all-wise God, and it is from the hand of a loving God, and it is from the hand of a gracious God. It is not by accident, but the Lord has some purpose of love

and mercy in it. Now so often we cannot discern God's purpose. That is why there is the need for submission. We cannot see God's purpose.

Of course, the account in the Word of God which specially deals with the mystery of divine providence is the life of Joseph. Everything seems to be going wrong, but really everything is going right. Every step downward is really a step upward. How could he become ruler over Egypt, the deliverer of God's ancient people, the preserver of God's people alive? How can it be? He must be taken by his brothers, thrown into a pit, sold to the Ishmeelites, wrongly treated, falsely accused in Potiphar's house, a slave there, thrown into prison and then so shamefully treated by the chief butler. Everything was going wrong, but really everything was going right.

But beloved friends, I want you to notice one vital thing: Joseph himself did not know that. We know it; we read the life of Joseph in the light of "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." We know the end of it; we have always heard it. We see God's purpose in it. Joseph did not, and for many years he did not. It was many years before at last he had a glimmering. Everything seemed to be going wrong and we have one clue only to Joseph's thoughts: "Until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him." He felt he had a promise and yet everything was going contrary to the promise. He felt his brethren were going to bow before him, and yet it seemed he would never see them again. He did not know if they were alive or dead. "The word of the Lord tried him." Everything was working together for his real good, for the honour and glory of God, for the good of Israel. But Joseph could not see it. He could not see it at the time. It was not till many years later that he realised it. It was only then he could say, "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good." O the mystery of divine providence!

"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."

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” So what should our attitude, our posture be? Well first of all, that posture, that attitude of humble submission, not to question God’s ways, not to challenge them. But the second thing, to believe that God *has* a purpose. We may not see it, but He *has* a purpose, and, “What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.”

“Hereafter He will make me know,
And I shall surely find,
He was too wise to err, and O,
Too good to be unkind.”

But what are some of the ends that God has in these sudden, unexpected afflictions He brings on His people? One is to stir up their nest. How often we become easy, complacent, at ease in Zion, and the Lord sends these things to stir up our nest. And then sometimes there is not so much prayer, but these things come and they force us to the sinners’ Friend; they force us in the pathway of prayer; they make the throne of grace attractive, precious to us. Then also we have to be conformed to the image of God’s suffering Son. “This people have I formed for Myself.” The stone has to be hewn into its shape, the piece of clay has to be formed in the hands of the Potter as it pleases Him, this people formed for Himself who shall show forth His praise. Then to think of the sufferings of Christ. “Did Christ, my Lord, suffer, and shall I repine?” I think God’s people, if you were to take them in the aggregate, most of their real blessings have been received in times of trouble, either spiritual, or providential, or family, or business, or church, or bodily. And often when they have been afflicted they have been led by faith by the Holy Spirit to look on the afflictions of the Saviour. “In all their affliction He was afflicted.” And then, “Consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.” We realise we deserve it. O but the dear Saviour, “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.”

“How bitter that cup, no heart can conceive,
Which He drank quite up that sinners might live!
His way was much rougher and darker than mine;
Did Christ, my Lord, suffer, and shall I repine?”

“What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” Shall we know and love the Saviour who was a Man of

sorrows and shall we have nothing but a pathway of ease? Shall we not realise that if God were strict to mark iniquity and deal with us entirely according to our sins, it would be nothing but receiving evil and never receiving good? “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.”

“God will not always chide;
And, when His strokes are felt,
His strokes are fewer than our crimes,
And lighter than our guilt.”

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” But to know this and to believe it, and there is love in it. Paul says, “We know that *all things* work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.” Paul did not say, We can see it. He certainly did not say, We can feel it. But he said, We know it. And we do! “*When, and where, and by what means*, to His wisdom leaving.” But, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”

“What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” It is usually afterwards that the Lord’s people see it. Rutherford says,

“I’ll bless the hand that guided,
I’ll bless the heart that planned,
When throned where glory dwelleth
In Immanuel’s land.”

It is usually in looking back. It is discerning how these things have worked together for good, and many a dear child of God before he dies has looked back to his most painful affliction and said, “I would never have been without it! God did not make a mistake. That disappointment *was* His appointment.”

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” So the Apostle Paul in the depths of trouble in prison in Rome wrote to the churches, “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” Now how can it be? It was a dreadful trial to the early church, the great apostle in prison. He could no longer visit them.

He could no longer travel to preach to them. “I would ye should understand,” says Paul. Unbelief can never understand it and never will, but faith does understand it, and if it does not understand it, it believes it. “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out *rather*” – he puts a *rather* on it – “rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” “The things which happened unto me.” Now you can fill that in yourself this evening. You know what has happened to you; I know what has happened to me. “The things which happened unto me have fallen out.” They did not just spring from the dust. They fell out, out of the lap of divine providence, out of the hand of a good and gracious and infinitely-wise God, who never makes a mistake.

“I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” How did it work with Paul? Two things he could not have expected. He was in prison in Rome, and there were some of God’s hidden ones there whom he would otherwise never have met, but God used him there for the furtherance of the gospel. And the other thing: he could no longer preach, but he wrote those Epistles which are still a blessing to the church today.

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” What seems evil to us may be in God’s hand His everlasting purpose for the good of His people, for the honour and glory of His name, for our personal blessing. “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” To see these things working for good. But when we cannot, when we wonder why, if the conflict is severe, if the way is hard, the bow is still in the cloud. It is always there, however dark the cloud. “When *I* bring a cloud over the earth.” It did not come by accident. “Trouble, like a gloomy cloud.” “When I bring a cloud over the earth ... the bow shall be seen in the cloud” – the token of God’s faithfulness, the token of God’s mercy, the token of His covenant of grace. “For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.” So there is a resting place here, a blessed resting place here for faith, and above everything else, whatever sorrows, trials, disappointments, afflictions God’s people know, the Lord loves them and He loves them eternally the same.

“Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”