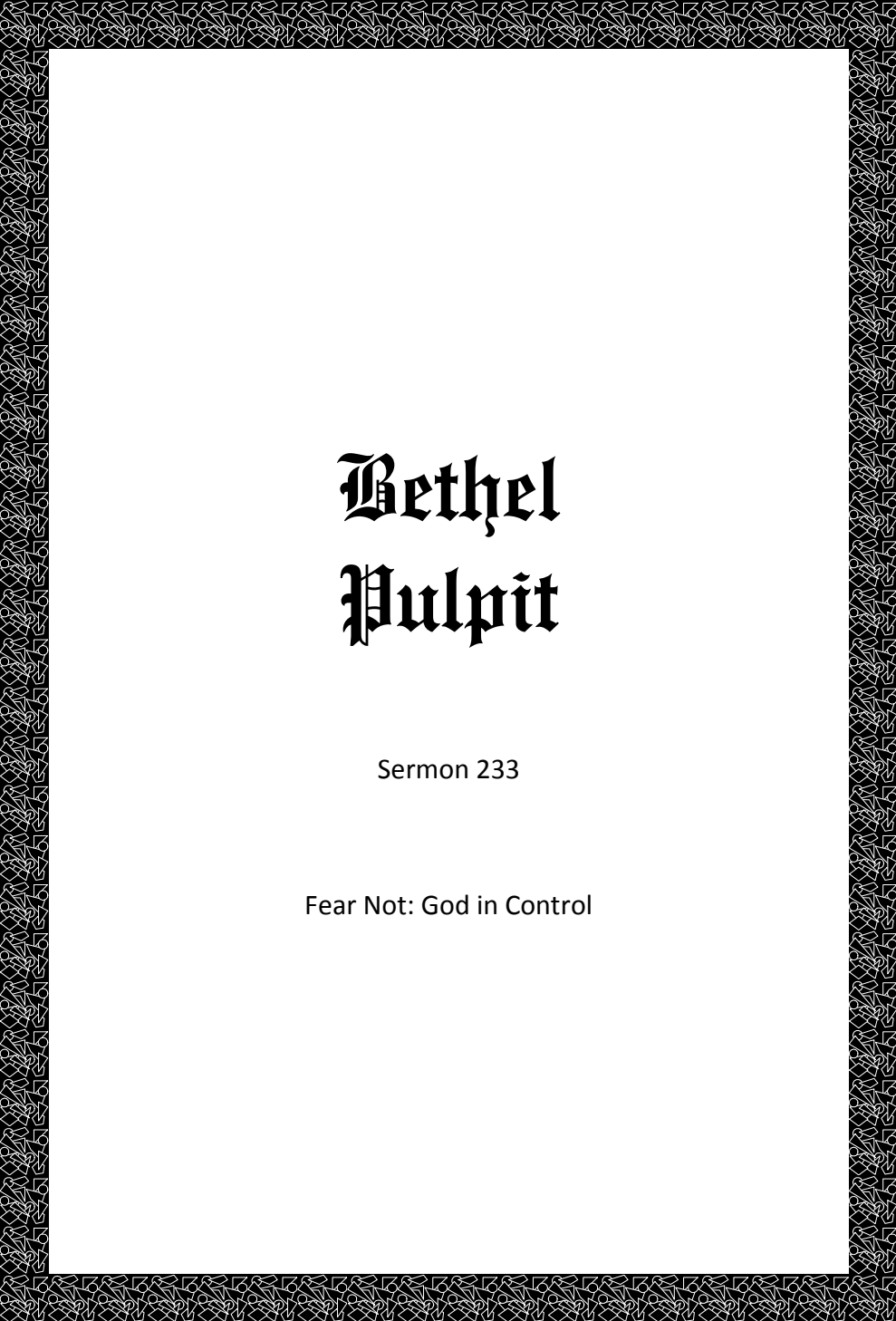




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 233

Fear Not: God in Control

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 12th September, 2004**

Text: “*Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows*” (Luke 12. 6, 7).

I believe this was the best sermon ever preached on the mystery of divine providence. I know there is that wonderful work by John Flavel, one of the most gracious works ever written, *The Mystery of Divine Providence*. It is a long work, many pages, many chapters. Well, there are only a few short, simple words here, but how the incarnate Son of God so beautifully unfolds the mystery of divine providence!

Really the point that the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ makes here is exceedingly simple, yet so important, and it is this: that God is in control in everything. And here what the Lord Jesus emphasises is that, in the smallest things, concerning the most minute things, God is still on the throne, God all-wise, God almighty, God in control. Things do not take place by chance or accident, not the smallest things, not the most insignificant things. And very, very beautifully the Lord Jesus opens this up: “Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” God in control. As we sometimes sing, “My life’s minutest circumstance is subject to His eye.” It is on the ground of this that the Lord Jesus says, “Fear not.”

Have you noticed this, that in Scripture whenever God says to His people, “Fear not,” He gives a reason for it – always? Now the world does not. Often a mother kindly, lovingly, tenderly says to one of her children, “Now don’t be afraid,” and she perhaps knows there is every reason to be afraid. Sometimes your friends will try to speak kindly to you, and they say, “Don’t worry; don’t be afraid.” You know in your innermost heart there is every reason to worry, every reason to be afraid. But when the Lord says, “Fear not,” then there is no cause to fear.

There are some wonderful *fear nots* in Scripture, and it would be a wonderful thing if some of these *fear nots* were graciously applied to our hearts. What is the first *fear not* in Scripture? When God spoke to

Abraham. He had just fought that battle with the kings, rescued Lot, and it seemed that the whole of the neighbourhood would be against him. Almost certainly there was going to be revenge. Almost certainly they would seek his life. There was everything to cause Abraham to fear, and Almighty God said, “Abraham, fear not.” And He gave him a reason, and it was a good reason: “I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” So it does not matter about all these heathen kings with all their malice, all their hatred and all their power, or anything Satan will do. “Abram: I am thy shield.”

You know what a shield is. Really, in ancient times a warrior used a shield to defend himself. And do not think of some of those ancient shields as just those little things you carry on your arm. Some of them were enormous shields. They almost enveloped the warrior completely. But really the shield was what came between the blow and the person the blow was aimed at. There are many blows aimed at God’s people, but if God is our shield, then, “Fear not, Abram,” and those here this morning who are Abraham’s seed. Now who are they? “And if ye be Christ’s,” if you belong to Him, and many of you do, don’t you? “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye” – ye in this chapel – “then are ye Abraham’s seed.” “Fear not, Abram” – and Abraham’s seed – “I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” Then no real harm can come upon you.

But this is a vast subject, and really I had never intended entering on it this morning, but it may be a help; it may be profitable. A sinner, O so fearful. Why? Because so guilty, such vileness, such sin, and the Lord says, “Fear not.” O but you say, “Surely there is every need to fear, a sinner like me, sins so great!” Now the Lord always gives a reason when He says, “Fear not.” What does He say to this guilty sinner? “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.” Then there is no need to fear if redeemed by precious blood and if belonging to the Saviour.

Now not to go too far with this subject, though it is interesting and important and precious, isn’t it? The unknown way, you shrink from it; you fear it. And perhaps it is not altogether unknown. Perhaps you do know a bit about it, and there is “trouble, like a gloomy cloud” threatening you. The Lord says, “Fear not.” You say, “Lord, there is every reason for me to fear.” The Lord says, “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed.” You say, “Lord, there is every reason to be dismayed.” “Be

not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness.” Then, “Fear not.”

And here, God is in control; God is on the throne. Then, “Fear not.” “Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” That is, God in control over everything, the great things and the small, even the smallest. “Fear not therefore.” At this time of the year we think of all the sorrow, tragedy, confusion in the world. We think of all that has been taking place in Russia, and then yesterday, three years since that terrible attack on the twin towers in the United States. And there seems to be lawlessness on every hand, and all these terrible things we are hearing. Now this is the confidence, the hope of the people of God, that God is on the throne; God is in control. But not just these great things in the earth, but things in our little lives. “My life’s minutest circumstance is subject to His eye.”

“Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore.” This statement that the Lord makes here seems almost incredible, and really no one but the Lord Jesus could have made it: “The very hairs of your head are all numbered.” If it had not been the Lord Jesus who said it, we would have surely exclaimed, “That is an exaggeration. The very hairs of my head all numbered? Is God concerned how many hairs there are on my head? Does it really matter?” Let us be clear, I do not believe the Lord Jesus is speaking here in a metaphorical way. You know what I mean by a metaphorical way: when you say something just as a comparison. Sometimes in Scripture I do think this expression is used in a metaphorical way: “There shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground” – in some of those Old Testament passages, almost a statement of being safe, being secure. But I believe here the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ meant what He said, and so often I come back to what my old friend Mr. Wolstenholme, the Lancashire preacher, said: “We do not believe what we do believe. That is a lot of our trouble.” And it is. But if this morning when you were combing or brushing your hair, one of the hairs of your head fell to the ground, it did not cause you any tears, did it? You did not look round and pick it up. The very hairs of His people’s heads are precious to God. I do not think there is anything in all Scripture that comes lower than that. “O what matchless condescension!”

I believe it is literally so, that the very hairs of God's people are all known to God, all numbered. But if you take it in its more general sense, it means this: that the smallest, most insignificant things in the lives of God's people matter to Almighty God, their Father in heaven. Now if only you and I could receive that. "The very hairs of your head are all numbered." There is nothing too small, nothing too minute, nothing too insignificant for Almighty God in the lives of His people. That is how dear they are to Him. That is how precious they are to Him. "Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Then you can see the everlasting security of the people of God here, can't you? That if not one hair of their head can fall to the ground without divine permission, then Satan will never be allowed to snatch one of them and not one of them will be allowed to sink down into hell.

"Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." The Lord Jesus puts these two words in, because people would say, "Can it be so? It seems incredible." He puts the word *even* and He puts the word *very*. It is so. "*Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*" Not one can fall to the ground by chance, by accident, without God's divine, almighty, all-wise permission. So you see the wonderful, watchful care that the Lord exercises over His poor, unworthy people, His care for them. So it is, "Casting all your care upon Him." Why? "For He careth for you."

"‘Cast,’ He said, ‘on Me thy care;
’Tis enough that I am nigh;
I will all thy burdens bear;
I will all thy needs supply.’"

"Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Then it means this: there is nothing too small to take to Almighty God in prayer. Sometimes we have little, trivial things and they bother us, they worry us, and we dare not speak to a friend about them. They would smile at us. But you can go to Almighty God with these tiny, trivial, insignificant things and He will not be offended. What is the smallest thing you have ever had to pray about? There is nothing too small to take to Almighty God in prayer. That is the privilege of the throne of grace, the privilege of the blood-sprinkled mercy seat.

"The very hairs of your head are all numbered." Ah, but here is the rub. Here comes the question. If there is such loving, tender care, if the very hairs of my head are all numbered, why, O why, why did the Lord

allow these things to take place with me, in my life, in my circumstances, in my family? If the very hairs of my head are all numbered, why did this take place? Why didn't the Lord prevent it? Why did He allow it? O the mystery of divine providence! But one or two things are clear. One is that nothing, *nothing* can take place without His permission. If it has taken place, it is because He allowed it, and if He did, though we cannot see His purpose in it, yet He makes no mistakes. It must be for the honour and glory of His name. It must be for our real good. "*When, and where, and by what means*, to His wisdom leaving." "We cannot, Lord, Thy purpose see, but all is well that's done by Thee." O but what a word this! If only we believed it. But how strange that these things take place, these cross-providences, these troubles, these accidents. We cannot see any end, any purpose. But to find a resting place here, find submission here: "The very hairs of your head are all numbered." If only we believed what we do believe.

"Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings?" Again, the whole point is an insignificant thing, something that does not matter, something that is not important. Why, for only two farthings you could buy five sparrows. The other gospel said you could get two for one farthing. Here you could get five for two farthings. You children will not remember, but when I was a boy in our money we had pennies. Then we had ha'pennies; that was half a penny. And then we had farthings; that was a quarter of a penny. The little, tiny farthing used to have a wren on one side. But really you could not buy anything with it, and long ago they took it out of circulation. There are no farthings now – something that does not really matter. "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?" The other gospel we read this morning puts it like this: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father." Now if you ever see a dead sparrow, always remember that that little sparrow could not be killed, could not fall to the ground, nothing could touch it, nothing could happen to it, apart from the providence of God, apart from His permission.

Notice what the Lord Jesus said: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without *your* Father." He does not say, *their* Father. God takes care of sparrows; God watches over sparrows; God is interested in sparrows; but God is not their Father as He is the Father of His people. That is the point here. "Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows." God is not their

Father, but He is His people's Father in Christ. "One of them shall not fall on the ground" – you would think it would say, without *their* Father – "Without *your* Father." How often the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, speaking to His people, used this expression: "Your Father," or, "Your Father in heaven," or, "Your heavenly Father." One thing He said was this, and what a comfort it has been to so many of God's people: "Your heavenly Father knoweth." What have you got this morning? What have you got tomorrow? "Your heavenly Father knoweth." That is, He knows, He understands, He cares. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God." "Your heavenly Father knoweth." And,

"Your heavenly Father ever lives,
And all His choicest treasure gives
To you, the favourites of His heart,
Nor will He ever with you part."

"Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things."

"Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father." No doubt you are familiar with the well-known letter of J. C. Philpot to William Gadsby when he fell and broke his leg. He said, "If not a sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father, much less the redeemed body of William Gadsby." And then here: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?" I often put it like this: I wonder how many of you have seen a sparrow this morning. Probably you do not know whether you have or whether you have not, and if you did, perhaps you have forgotten all about it. "Not one of them is forgotten before God." Does God take care for sparrows? "Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows." "Not one of them is forgotten before God." Then if a little sparrow is not forgotten, what of the Lord's chosen, eternally-loved, redeemed people? "Not one of them is forgotten before God." "O Israel," says Almighty God, "O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me." It is a hurting thing, sometimes, to be forgotten, to be overlooked when you should not be forgotten, should not be overlooked. Perhaps it is your birthday and someone you think a lot of forgets all about it, or perhaps you are in trouble and someone forgets you. Then God comes: "O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me."

“Forget thee I will not, I cannot; thy name
Engraved on My heart does for ever remain;
The palms of My hands while I look on I see
The wounds I received when suffering for thee.”

“O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me.”

“Not one ... is forgotten before God.... Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.” We think of that most beautiful word: “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?” Is it possible? Can it be so? “Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands.” “Yet will I not forget thee.” The sparrows never sinned. They never rebelled against God. They were never His enemies. O but what about wretched, guilty, unworthy sinners! “Yet will I not forget thee. Behold” – one of God’s *beholds* again – “Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands.” God’s people were put into the hands of Christ from all eternity in the covenant of grace. When He went to Calvary in His sin-atonement sufferings, the names of all His people were there deeply engraven on the palms of His hands. O but if only we could rise to that sweet assurance of faith with Toplady:

“My name from the palms of His hands
Eternity will not erase,
Impressed on His heart it remains,
In marks of indelible grace.”

Now what a favour, what love, what mercy to unworthy sinners in the Person of Christ!

“Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?” – not one. “But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.” That *fear not*. Well, some of you are like Gideon. You say, “If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?” “Go in this thy might ... have not I sent thee?” God 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 we know how lovingly He does care for His people and always will care for His people. But these mysterious things that come upon them! “*When, and where, and by what means*, to His wisdom leaving.”

“Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.” Which really is an amazing thing, that in the sight of a holy God His poor, unworthy people are of value. That is why He speaks of them as a *peculiar people*. Do not misunderstand that expression. It comes in one or two places in Scripture. “A peculiar people.” It does not mean they are strange; it does not mean they are unusual, though some of them are. But it means *peculiar* in this sense: very special, peculiarly precious to God, peculiarly loved with an everlasting love. “A peculiar people,” a special people, His treasure. “The Lord hath chosen Jacob unto Himself, and Israel for His peculiar treasure.”

“Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.” Now in what way are the people of God of more value than many sparrows? Well, as loved with an everlasting love, as ordained for heaven. But especially of more value because bought at so great a price. Some things you may see, it may be in an antique shop, and you might say, “Surely this rickety old thing is not worth £1,500!” But the owner says, “It is so valuable. I paid such a high price for it.” If you have anything and you paid a great price for it, then you will value it. You will try to make sure it is not stolen or broken or damaged. The value of the people of God in the eyes of their Redeemer! It is redeemed with the blood of Jesus, the price paid for them rather than they should be eternally lost. “He bought our souls from death and hell; the price, His own heart’s blood.” And that is why He makes *all things* work together for the honour and glory of His name and for their real, lasting, eternal good. Gadsby says,

“There’s not a particle of dust can fly,
A sparrow fall, or cloud obscure the sky,
A moth be crushed, or leaf fall from a tree,
But in submission to His wise decree.”

Do you believe it? And then Gadsby goes on (and didn’t the old preachers used to quote this?):

“He must and will at all times keep in view
His glory, and His people’s welfare too;
Bright days, dark nights, the furnace or the flood,
He overrules for Zion’s real good.”

“Ye are of more value than many sparrows.” And that is why He makes *everything* work together for the glory of His name and His people’s real,

lasting eternal good. The bright days and the dark nights, the furnace and the flood, He overrules for Zion's real good.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.”