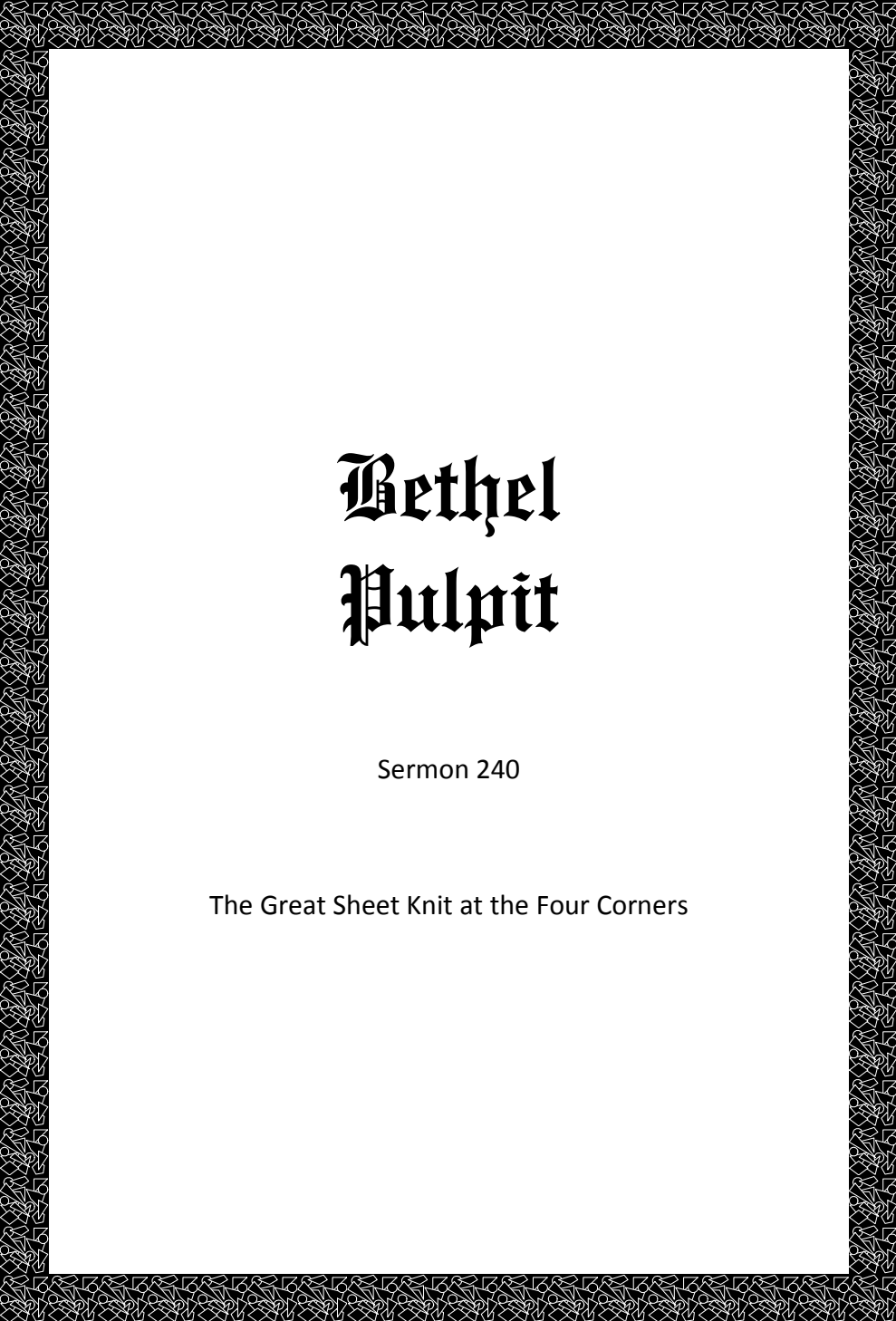




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 240

The Great Sheet Knit at the Four Corners

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 10th July, 2005**

Text: *“And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10. 11-15).*

We have this most interesting and remarkable account of the opening of the door of faith to the Gentiles. Previously to this, the gospel was preached to Jews only. But now it was God's purpose it should be preached to the Gentiles and then through all the world. So these strange, mysterious circumstances.

There was a Roman centurion whose name was Cornelius. It seemed that he had a measure of divine light according to the Jewish religion, but he was not satisfied. The Lord was working in his heart, but he could not get what he wanted; he was not satisfied. There were many things he still did not know. He had not got that personal knowledge of Christ. He was burdened about it. He was concerned. He was praying about it. Let us be clear, beloved friends, the Lord never leaves a work unfinished. If He begins a work, He completes it. He had begun a work in the centurion's heart and so this work was going to be completed. This man was going to be blessed. But how could this happen? It was impossible. He had not heard the truth preached. He did not know Christian people. He did not know a gospel minister. And God sent an angel from heaven and told him the minister's name, told him the minister's address, told Cornelius to send for him, and told Cornelius that he would come.

Beloved friends, in our churches and congregations and arrangements for ministers, there would be a lot more blessing and prosperity, I am sure, if there were more of this spirit of Cornelius, waiting upon the Lord. He knows where the man is: Simon Peter. He knows where he lives: Joppa. He even knows his address: “with one Simon a

tanner, whose house is by the sea side.” And God says he will come. Yet at that very moment the Lord said he would come, it was the farthest thing in all the earth from Simon Peter. Preach to Gentiles? He would disdain to do it; he would refuse to do it. But God’s people and God’s servants have to have a lot of prejudices knocked down. Cornelius sent a devout soldier and two of his servants and there they were travelling from Caesarea to Joppa to ask for Simon Peter and to invite him to come to Cornelius’ house. He was the last person in the world who would have come. But if God has a purpose to be fulfilled, it will be fulfilled. If God would have us do something, we will do it. If He would have us go somewhere, we will go there.

So here were these three men coming nearer to the house and Peter is on top of the flat roof feeling hungry and he falls into trance. In a vision he sees a most remarkable thing. There is a great sheet knit at the four corners coming down from heaven. There were all these various creatures in it. Some were clean according to the law; some were unclean according to the law. In all its simplicity, Jews and Gentiles. Some were clean; some were unclean.

In the vision God said, “Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.” Peter said, “Not so, Lord.” Let us be clear, that is a contradiction in terms, to call Jesus “Lord,” and then to say, “Not so” to what He tells us to do. We have all got this spirit of Simon Peter. “Why call ye Me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” We call Jesus “Lord,” but we do not always obey His commandments. It is an absolute contradiction: “Not so, Lord.”

“The voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” It was a strange vision. Peter did not really understand it. God was telling him to do something he had never done before. God was telling him to do something he did not want to do. God was showing him that the church of God was now going to be composed of Gentiles as well as Jews – Gentiles that Peter called unclean as well as Jews that Peter called clean. And Peter could not understand it. He was mystified. But as he came round from the trance, there were these three men from Cornelius knocking at the door. God’s timing is perfect. If they had arrived an hour before and asked Peter to preach in Caesarea to the Gentiles, Peter would have driven them from the door. Perhaps he would not even have spoken to them. But God’s timing was perfect, and

while Peter was thinking about what it meant, the Holy Spirit spoke in his heart.

Sometimes the Lord is leading you. You come to a point. Something is happening. You do not understand it. But “God is His own Interpreter.”

“Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.” That was clear leading. Some of us would like clear leading like that. I knew an old, godly minister who is now in heaven. As I remember it, he had three invitations to pastorates and he was bewildered. He could not think which of the three. He liked them all, felt drawn to them all. The Lord powerfully spoke this word to him: “Behold, three men seek thee.” He received the letters of invitation. One was from two deacons; one was from three; one was from four. So he knew exactly what to do. Mind you, I find in my little life things do not seem to happen very much like that. I am sure if there is clear leading like that, it will be very severely tried. The only point I am trying to make, how the Lord has a blessed ability to use a scripture that was written aforetime. “The Word of God is not bound.”

So Peter enquired what it was all about and they told him how an angel had spoken to Cornelius, who Cornelius was, what he wanted to know. And so Peter with some of his friends and the three men set out, and the next day they arrived. This is the first official preaching to the Gentiles according to God’s eternal purpose. Why I say, *official*, because you can think of things like Philip preaching to the eunuch. He was a Gentile. But really this was the first official preaching.

Now I do like this word of Cornelius to Peter. There they were gathered. If you will, the service is going to begin. They had never heard preaching before. What is their attitude? What is their posture? How did they come? Do you know what he said to Peter? “Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.” It would be a wonderful thing if whenever we meet for public worship we meet in that posture. “We are here present” – that is true of all of us. “We *are* here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.” You say, “We come to listen to a sermon; we come to listen to a preacher; we come to listen to a text.” “To hear all things that are commanded thee of God.”

It was a wonderful sermon that Peter preached. What about this: “The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ”? That would be a lovely text for a sermon. “Preaching peace by Jesus Christ.” “Peace by His cross has Jesus made.” “Preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (He is Lord of all.)”

“Sinners, whose love can ne’er forget
The wormwood and the gall,
Go, spread your trophies at His feet,
And crown Him Lord of all.”

And then there was the gracious effect of it, the Holy Ghost descending on them, Cornelius blessed, the people blessed. And then, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” That, beloved friends, is the New Testament qualification for baptism: first to receive the Holy Ghost, which means to be born again of the Spirit, to be blessed with repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus. “Can any man forbid water” – dare any man forbid water – “that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.”

Well then, really that is just a little opening up and explanation of the chapter. Now I want to speak to you about this great sheet knit at the four corners. Really, what it signifies: the church of God eternally bound up secure in the covenant of grace, Jews and Gentiles, both unclean by nature; the church of God in all ages inside this great sheet, bound up in it, secured in it. If you will, “bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God.” So really, though the text is completely different from this morning (Isaiah 26. 1, 2), the subject is exactly the same. “Blest inhabitants of Zion” – they are safe, they are secure within the walls of salvation. And these are the very same people – they are safe; they are secure. But the figure, the analogy is this: they are bound up secure in a great sheet. Now this is the blood-bought church of God in all ages, chosen, redeemed, sanctified, bound up in the bundle of life.

Peter “saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth.” Now this great sheet that binds up the whole blood-bought church of God in all ages is the covenant of grace. It is a great sheet; great love, loved with an everlasting love; great mercy; a great Saviour for great

sinners; a great salvation. Now it was a great sheet and it came down from heaven. It had a divine origin. It began with God. That is salvation; that is the covenant of grace. It has a divine origin. It all began in heaven. It is all God's work. Salvation comes down from heaven to lost, ruined, guilty sinners.

Peter "saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth." It was a wonderful view, the whole blood-bought church of God, sinners saved by grace in all ages, and they are all in the great sheet, they are all secure there, they are all safe there, they are all bound up there. In a word it is this, and may it be a good word to some of you:

"I've bound thee up secure,
'Midst all the rage of hell;
The curse thou never shalt endure,
For I'm unchangeable."

He "saw heaven opened." What a revelation! He "saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners." It was tied up. It was secure. It was the bundle of life, and it was tied up and fastened and secured with the cords of God's everlasting love. O that is the security of the covenant of grace! That is the security of the blood-bought church of God! That is the security of every sinner in it!

The point about it being bound up, tied up: not one of them could fall out. It was impossible that one of them could fall out. And there were some strange ones among them, but not one of them could fall out. There they were, all shut in and all bound up secure. These cords of God's everlasting love in Christ can never be broken. They can never be unloosed. At the end Peter said, "And the vessel was received up again into heaven." There was not a single one left behind; not a single one had escaped; not a single one had fallen out.

He "saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: wherein were all manner" of creatures. I believe this is one point the Lord revealed to me and taught me right at the beginning of my pastorate at Bethel, right in those early days, that in the church at Bethel we would have all manner of people, that all of them would be sinners, all of them would have their faults, all of them would make mistakes, but all of them

in the great sheet, and all of them cleansed in the blood of Christ. That has been such a help to me over the years. You will not find any two people the same, and you will not find any one person perfect, and you will not find yourself perfect. They were all unclean, whether Jews or Gentiles, every one of them, and they were all cleansed, every one of them. That is the church of God as bound up secure in the covenant of grace.

“Wherein were all manner” of creatures. Some were fourfooted beasts of the earth. Perhaps you feel a bit like that; you do not have much more religion than a beast of the earth. Some were wild beasts. Some were creeping things. They could not rise above the earth and they could not get on very fast. “My soul can neither fly nor go, to reach eternal joys.” And some were fowls of the air. But they were all unclean in God’s sight, all of them. But, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”

“The precious cleansing blood of Christ
Is a delightful theme;
When faith is lifted up the high’st,
She sings of none but Him.”

“All manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.” “And the voice spake unto him ... What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” It is a wonderful thing, “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

“The blood of Christ, a precious blood!
Cleanses from all sin, doubt it not,
And reconciles the soul to God,
From every folly, every fault.”

“What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” Now then, do you feel your need of cleansing? Has the Spirit of God taught you your need of being cleansed? Do you have to say, “Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”? Do you have to see it must all be in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? Do you have no other hope than this? “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” Now of course, these are very sacred truths, very blessed truths. David felt he could die on them. “Although my house be not so with God; 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.” They are wonderful truths.

Now this is the point: we want a personal interest. We want these covenant blessings, these covenant favours, this covenant salvation, to come right where we are. When you get home read the eleventh chapter. You have a little synopsis, if you will, of chapter 10. People started finding fault with Peter. They said he should not have gone. Peter told them right from the beginning why he went. But this is grace in his accusers: when he gave them an account of the Lord's leading, they were satisfied, and not only satisfied: they rejoiced.

But what I am coming to, in the next chapter when Peter is speaking of this great sheet, he comes out with a beautiful expression. He says, "It came even to me." That is just what every sinner saved by grace says and feels if he knows anything of an interest in these sacred things, these divine realities. "It came even to me." I did not find it; I did not attain to it; I did not reach it. It came right where I was. It was from God. It was from heaven. It was divine revelation, and such a sinner as me, "it came even to me." That is what we want. The last hymn in our hymnbook: "And all new covenant blessings brings; 'tis Jesus' precious blood." We want the Holy Spirit to *bring* these new covenant blessings, and we want to be able to say, "It came *even to me*."

These are wonderful truths, the everlasting safety, the eternal security of the people of God, bound up in the bundle of life. All those in the great sheet are safe, eternally secure. They can never perish. They can never be lost, despite all their faults and failures and sins and uncleanness. It seems what Peter saw, that though they were wild beasts and some were flying fowl, the wild beasts did not destroy the flying fowl and the flying fowl did not try to fly out of the sheet to get away from them. They seemed to dwell peacefully in the sheet. It is an amazing thing the different people the Lord has called and blessed, the most unexpected people, and sometimes two have been inveterate enemies and there they are dwelling together in love in the great sheet. And Peter says, "It came even to me." The psalmist puts it like this: "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him." This was a wonderful secret the Lord revealed to Peter, the secret of the eternal safety of the people of God. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will shew them His covenant." We want the Lord to show us the glories of the covenant of grace ordered in all things and sure, confirmed with the oath of God, sealed with the blood of Christ, and we want the Holy Ghost to show us our personal interest in that covenant, bound up in it.

O but I suppose the point is this: how did these creatures get into the sheet? The first answer and the simplest and the best answer is that God put them in. But there are two ways the Word of God speaks of covenant blessings in Christ. It speaks of them in the eternal purposes of God in eternity, how the Lord planned salvation and blessed His people and how they stood eternally in union with Christ, all these things you have been singing just now (Gadsby's 405). So in that sense from everlasting the whole church of God from Adam's day to the end of time was put by God Himself into the great sheet and tied in there with the cords of everlasting love. But then, secondly, in Scripture we read in various places of sinners being brought into that covenant, led into that covenant. Of course that means in the sweet experience of it. Let me just mention one: "I will cause you to pass under the rod." That is the rod of godly discipline. That is the rod of gracious correction. That is the rod of divine teaching. "I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant." Eternally in God's purposes they were there, but this is personally, experimentally. "I will bring you into the bond of the covenant." A wonderful thing to be brought by the Spirit of God into the bond of the covenant.

And how are these sinners personally brought into the bond of the covenant? In the analogy here, how did they get into the great sheet? By God-given repentance, by God-given faith, as a sinner led by the Spirit of God flees for refuge to Jesus, as he says, "Thou, O Christ, art all I want; all in all in Thee I find," as he says, "Hangs my helpless soul on Thee," so personally, feelingly, experimentally as a sinner he enters into the bonds of the covenant.

"Its bonds shall never break,
Though earth's old columns bow;
The strong, the tempted, and the weak,
Are one in Jesus now."

O a sinner by precious, God-given faith, led by the Spirit of God, going after Christ, seeking after Him, reaching after Him, praying to Him, seeking Him, finding Him, and so personally entering into this great sheet, bound up in the bundle of life. It is a bundle *of life* because it is a living Saviour there who lives no more to die, who says, "Because I live, ye shall live also." But *all of them* are sinners, *all of them* are unclean, whether Jews or Gentiles, and they have to flee to the Saviour seeking to be

cleansed in the fountain opened, the blood of Christ, and as they flee to the Saviour by faith, they enter into the bonds of the covenant, into the great sheet knit at the four corners.

How did they get into the sheet? I suppose these fourfooted beasts walked in. I suppose these wild beasts rushed in. I suppose these creeping things crawled in. I suppose these fowls of the air flew in. But the point is, they got in; they were in. The different degrees of faith, the different exercises of faith, strong faith, little faith, trembling faith – O but the great point, that faith which brings us to the Saviour and venturing on the Saviour by faith we enter in. We read of some who entered into rest. We read of those who entered into the ark. We read of those who entered into the city of refuge. We read of those this morning who entered into Zion through the open gates. It is that entering, and the great point is being inside.

When William Gadsby went to Manchester, his preaching shook the city, especially the religious people, and they did not know what to make of him. In the end, the ministers of Manchester discussed Gadsby. Then they told him they believed he would get to heaven at last, but he would only just get in. Gadsby's reply was, "If I am *in*, I am *in*, and I will bless God to all eternity that so great a sinner as myself is found in heaven."

Well, where do you come in? Unclean, unclean? Where do you come in? Fourfooted beasts? Creeping thing? Flying fowl? Wild beast? But is there something which draws you to Jesus, and venturing on Him, reaching after Him, coming to Him by precious, God-given faith, personally, feelingly, experimentally you enter into the great sheet, and once *in* you are *in* for ever. Despite your sin, your uncleanness, you cannot fall out, neither can you be cast out, because, "what God hath cleansed, that call not thou common," or unclean. "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin." O but to see the safety, the eternal security of "the vilest sinner out of hell, who lives to feel his need" and is brought as a true believer to the foot of the cross to plead the Saviour's blood.

"A great sheet knit at the four corners." "Saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation."