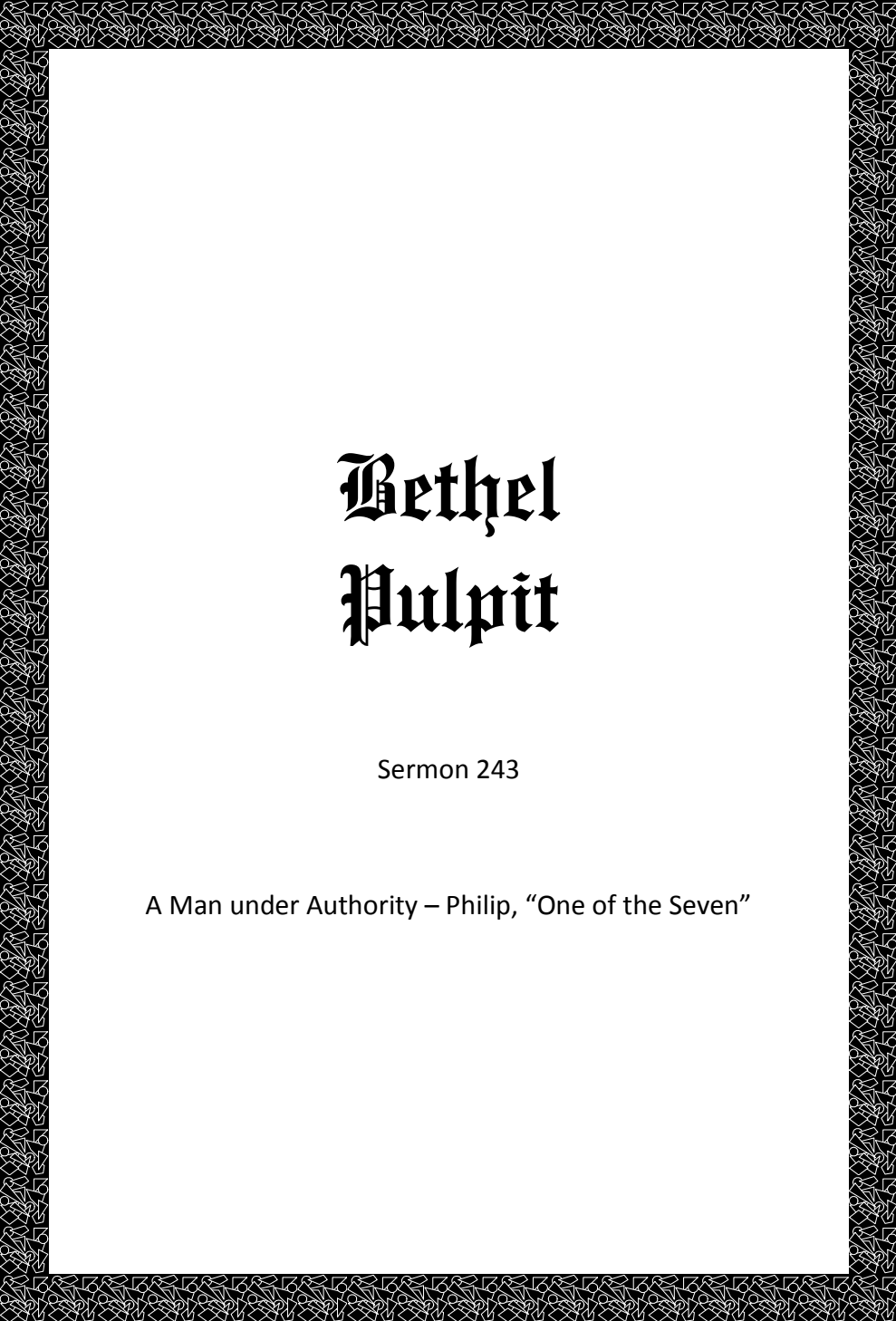




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 243

A Man under Authority – Philip, “One of the Seven”

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 2nd October, 2005**

Text: *"A man under authority" (Matthew 8. 9).*

These, of course, were the words that the centurion spoke to the Lord Jesus when he begged Him to heal his servant. He said, "I am a man under authority." A Roman centurion was. And he had authority himself, and knew what it meant. If I say to this man, Go, well, there is no disobedience; he goes. If I say to another one, Come, immediately he is obedient; he comes. If I say to another one, Do this, he does it; there is no argument. The centurion's point was that if he had such authority, what of the authority of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who spoke the world into being, who by one word stilled the storm?

"Creatures of every sort and kind
Are all at Thy control;
The God that fills immensity
Must reign from pole to pole."

The centurion's point was that all the Lord needed to do was speak one word and the servant would be healed. "Speak the word only." He had such views of the Lord's authority and the little illustration he gave was from his own authority. Yet he himself said, "I am a man under authority."

Well, perhaps this morning you feel that this is going to be a somewhat unusual sermon. Let me explain. This week in our daily reading, we were reading the Acts of the Apostles chapter 8, the chapter that was read this morning. The one thing that amazed me was the most godly, gracious character of this man Philip. The Acts of the Apostles chapter 8 is a well-known chapter. We read it at our baptizing services. We think of the preaching in Samaria. We think of the wonderful account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. But I was impressed again and again at the godliness and grace of this man Philip, and this word seemed to remain with me right through the week: "A man under authority." That is every true minister of the gospel. That is every true servant of Christ. That is every sinner saved by grace, whether man or woman, boy or girl. If you and I by precious faith have been brought as sinners to Jesus' feet, it is not just to know Him as our Saviour: it is to know Him as our Lord. "One is your Master, even Christ." It is the obedience of faith.

“A man under authority.” Of course, one or two of the well-known autobiographies or biographies have been written under this title. I took one up this morning in my study that was given to me, a signed copy, at the Christian Booksellers’ Convention a few years ago by one of the well-known, modern ministers. He entitled it, *A Man Under Authority*. Well, there *is* an authority with Almighty God. There *is* an authority with the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. There *is* an authority in the church. There *is* an authority in the Word of God. There *is* an authority in the preaching of the everlasting gospel. There *is* an authority in the work of the Holy Spirit. And if your religion and mine is real, we shall be under it. We shall be under authority. I am not my own; I am bought with a price. “A man under authority.” The things we do, the things we do not do, where we go, where we do not go, the way we speak, the way we behave, the whole of our conversation, the whole of our life. “Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price.”

“A man under authority.” I was amazed at the way in which those few words describe the gracious life and witness and ministry of this man Philip. We speak so much about Peter and Paul, even Barnabas, but not so much about Philip. O but what a godly man he was, and how the Lord blessed him! In so many ways this is the point with you and me this morning: in so many ways what a lovely example he was to us. When the Lord said, No, he remained. When the Lord said, Yes, he went. “What wilt Thou have me to do?” Nothing without the Lord’s mind, the Lord’s favour, however mysterious; but if the Lord says it, it must be right. Then I go. Seemingly however wonderful, glorious an opportunity, if the Lord says, No, He closes the door, I do not argue, I do not fight against it. “Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power.” If you see a willing servant in the whole of Scripture, it is this man Philip.

So really though I have read the text from Matthew 8 this morning, the subject is Philip, “a man under authority.” O what an example for us, what teaching, what rebukes, what reproof! So really the subject this morning is not Matthew 8; it is the Acts of the Apostles chapter 8. Let me say this first of all. This godly man Philip in the Acts of the Apostles is not the Philip of the gospels, not the Philip who was one of the disciples of the Lord Jesus. This Philip was not one of the twelve apostles. This is another Philip, a different Philip. So do not get them mixed up. This is the Philip who was “one of the seven”; later on in the Acts of the Apostles this is the name given to him: “Philip ... which was one of the seven” (Acts 21. 8),

those who were chosen to help the apostles in the more mundane affairs of the early church, looking after the widows.

“A man under authority.” The first thing that we hear of this man Philip, he was a man “full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.” Now what a witness! Very few people in the whole of Scripture have such an eminent title as that: a man “full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.” So where Philip came from, we do not know, but we know there was a time when as a sinner seeking salvation, in repentance and faith he had been brought to the Saviour’s feet, “surrendered to the Crucified,” constrained by His love, obedient to His will, and he is described as being “full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.” Not only so, but the people noticed it, the people saw it. The early church saw it. Grace can be seen. It is like the fruit tree. You cannot see the roots that are the secret of it all, but at harvest time you can see the fruit on the bough. Sad, solemn thing if there is no fruit in our religion, if no one notices it, if no one sees that there is anything different.

So the Lord had chosen this man, redeemed him, called him, and now He was fitting him to be a true servant, “a man under authority,” under God’s authority. And the first authority he was found under was the authority of the church. This is one thing which seems to be forgotten today. The church of God has authority, God-given authority. That does not mean a denomination or the Roman Catholics or the Church of England. A local church, if properly constituted, has authority, and God has given it that authority: authority to receive members; authority to exclude members, whether it is honourably or dishonourably; authority to choose its own officers; authority to choose its pastors; authority to exercise discipline when needed. This point of church order is a point that is not much thought about today, but there is so much in the New Testament about it, that the local church has God-given authority; it is not “just a few old people gathering in a little chapel.” The church at Bethel has God-given authority, and the pastor as the representative of that church has God-given authority. I think there would be more blessing throughout our denomination if people more and more realised there is a God-given authority according to His holy Word – never contrary to it – in the church of God.

So, “a man under authority,” and the first authority he knew was the church at Jerusalem. These seven men who were chosen are usually spoken of as the first seven deacons. Let us be clear, in that initial

choice of the first deacons, it was more of a menial task. The widows were complaining. Jewish widows were being favoured and Greek widows were being neglected, and some were being helped more and some were being helped less. Seven men were appointed to deal with it, and they dealt with it exceedingly well. One of these was Philip and the other well-known one was Stephen. “A man under authority.” Philip did not say, Look, I am a man full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom. I can do something better than visiting these old women and finding bread for them and taking it to them. He was “a man under authority.” I believe that Philip was as happy visiting those poor old women in Jerusalem as he was when he was preaching to thousands in Samaria. That is “a man under authority.” If only you and I were obedient to the Lord’s will. If only you and I were content to do the Lord’s will. Wasn’t it Newton who said that if Almighty God sent two angels from heaven to earth, one to rule over the greatest kingdom on earth and the other to be a road sweeper, that road sweeper would not be envious or jealous of the other, but absolutely content to be in the place where the Lord had put him? Paul once said, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” Later he said, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.”

So this man was a most godly man. He was an eminent man. And you see him in that sacred delight, humbly walking in obedience to the Lord’s will and walking in obedience to the church at Jerusalem of which he was a member. Then trouble came. His fellow-deacon Stephen was martyred, murdered.

“A man under authority.” So the first way that Philip discerned the Lord’s leading in his life was by an outward call from the church. You notice right through Philip’s life the different ways in which he was led, and I think you will find in your little lives and mine that the Lord leads us in such different ways. Some of these things in Philip’s life seem so clear and some seem just the opposite. I tried to think of things in my own life, of the Lord’s dealings in love and mercy – joining the church, being led to preach, being led to a pastorate – and so completely different. The Lord is absolutely sovereign in the way He leads. Never dictate to God. Never chalk down two lines and tell the Lord to walk between. He will not. O these different ways. “A man under authority,” a godly man. He just wanted to be where the Lord would have him and he just wanted to do what the Lord would have him to do.

“There was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.... Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.” He had a clearer call to be a deacon than to be a preacher. Divine sovereignty is a great mystery in the way in which He leads you. There was not a clear word here. Later on you have an angel speaking, an angel coming from heaven. Another time you have the Holy Ghost speaking. Another time you have one of the strangest things: it just seems he was suddenly uprooted and taken away bodily to another place. But here it was *circumstances*. It was impossible for God’s people to remain at Jerusalem. It seemed wisdom to them as they waited on the Lord that they should flee. They would not do anything against the Lord or against His Word, but we need to watch providence. We need to watch how the Lord is dealing in our life. We need to watch when He is closing a door. No doubt they did not want to leave Jerusalem, but they could see that God was stirring up their nest. They could not remain at Jerusalem. They had to go away from Jerusalem.

“A man under authority.” Beloved friends, watch the hand of God in providence and pray about it. Sometimes you might pray and pray and pray for a word; you might never get it. But it is just like the persecution at Jerusalem: there are circumstances; you have to leave. J.C. Philpot felt that he would have to leave the Church of England, cease to be a minister in the Church of England. Now he did not want to go. He said it was like cutting down the tree that bore the golden apple. So he said, Lord, I will go if Thou dost give me a word of direction. He never did get a word. In the end, the Lord solemnly rebuked him. He showed him that he was administering the Lord’s supper in the Church of England to one who was a noted adulterer, to one who was known to be guilty of murder but he had escaped, and to another one who openly denied that there was a God. The Lord showed him he never would get a word from Him. Philip never did get a word from the Lord. He showed him that if circumstances in providence were testifying, speaking loudly and clearly, there is something wrong if we do not listen to them. It may be like that with some of you this morning. You may be seeking the Lord’s will in this and that, and it is circumstances, stirring up your nest; the Lord is closing that door. But how that leading proved to be right! It was not a clear leading; it was not a clear word; it was just the working of providence, the closing of a door.

And if you understand me, Philip made the best of it. He had to go out so what did he do? He “went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.” The Samaritans were not popular with the Jews. The Samaritans were not a particularly nice group of people. Yet have you ever noticed that almost the last word the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ spoke on earth before He went to heaven was, “Samaria”? He told the apostles they had to preach at Jerusalem and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. Philip was not there – he was not a disciple – but I wonder if he knew that, if he had heard of it. So it was according to the Word of God.

This is one of the lovely scriptures: “Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.” He preached Christ unto them. This was the promised Messiah. He had come, the One who had been prophesied of old, Christ. He preached Him: who He was, who He is, the Son of God eternally, a real Man, His virgin birth, His whole life, His sin-atonement, His glorious resurrection. Because I am sure that if Philip went down to Samaria and preached Christ unto them, He preached “Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

It is a beautiful verse, isn't it? “Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.” And there was amazing blessing. There was a wonderful revival. “The people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake.” So he had not made a mistake concerning that moving of providence, that stirring of his nest. “There was great joy in that city.” O the honour that Philip had, the love that was shown to him! Do not forget, this was before Paul was even preaching at all, yet some of the greatest blessing in all the New Testament. This was a glorious time, one and another being wrought on by the Spirit of God, one and another being blessed. “There was great joy in that city.”

“A man under authority.” And one day suddenly God sent an angel from heaven. Do you know what that angel told Philip he had to do? We have it here: “Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.” You say, What? He is right in the midst of this. You would think he was going to stop in Samaria the rest of his life. We read about Whitefield; we read about Jonathan

Edwards. Was there anything like Philip in Samaria? But one day the Lord told him he had to leave Samaria. Why, Lord? Philip did not say that, but you and I would do. You have to leave Samaria; you have to travel south about sixty miles and into that desert. A desert, Lord? “Unto Gaza, which is desert.”

And this is one of the most blessed words in the whole New Testament: “He arose and went.” I do not know whether some of us would do that. You think of a minister preaching and hundreds being blessed, and the Lord appears one day and tells him, you have got to leave; you have got to go to a desert. He does not tell him why. He does not tell him why he is to leave. He does not tell him why he has to go to the desert. He does not tell him what he has to do when he gets to the desert. “He arose and went.” That is “a man under authority.” If ever you see a sinner “surrendered to the Crucified,” you see it in godly Philip there at the feet of Jesus.

I know it is hard for you and me to understand. An angel came down from heaven to tell him. Whether he saw this angel, whether the angel whispered to him, we do not know. It is difficult to relate it to today, because we do not find angels coming down from heaven to tell us things. But it was clear leading. It was exceedingly clear, and he knew it. Sometimes some of God’s people seem to do strange things. In those glorious days in Scotland many were being blessed under the preaching of that godly young minister, William C. Burns. They said every home in Scotland knew the name of William C. Burns. What is he doing leaving it all, sailing just to China where he lived in isolation and obscurity, preaching just to a few? “A man under authority.” A man content to do the will of God.

“Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. And he arose and went.” I wonder whether you and I would. I have thought of that long, lonely journey. It would take about two days. There would be all those questions in his heart: the mystery of divine providence, the way the Lord leads. Why, I would not be a bit surprised if a few of you this morning in one way or another are just like Philip travelling down from Samaria to Gaza. There are things in your life you just do not understand. What is the Lord doing with me? What is His plan for me? What is His purpose? That wonderful blessing, and then having to leave. “My thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

But, “he arose and went.” And as he was going along, two days later he must have wondered, What am I doing here in this desert? “A man under authority.” It was the Lord’s will. There in the distance he sees a chariot drawing near, and soon he could see it was quite an important person. If the Lord is leading you, if you have had to leave one place and the Lord has made that clear, that first step, He does not always tell you everything all at once. But you will see the little chariot coming along the horizon, nearer and nearer, and then the Lord will say, “Arise, and join thyself to this chariot.”

“His providence unfolds the book,
And makes His counsels shine;
Each opening leaf, and every stroke,
Fulfils some deep design.”

You say, What is this chariot? I am not going to see a chariot! A letter tomorrow morning, or a telephone call, or a casual remark someone speaks to you, and then everything is clear, everything in its place. The Lord is unfolding, His providence is unfolding the book. We know now why the Lord told Philip to leave the thousands. It shows the concern and love the Lord has for one person. For one person Philip has to leave the thousands. We know the end of it; we know the reason for it.

“A man under authority.” This time it was the Holy Spirit speaking to him. Before it was an angel. I do not think I have enough wisdom or grace or ability to try to distinguish between an angel speaking to you or the Holy Spirit speaking to you, but the point is, Philip knew it. He knew it came from heaven. He knew it came from God. What do you make of this – “a man under authority” – “The Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. And Philip ran thither to him”? He ran there. O the willingness, the loving obedience of this man Philip! “I will run the way of Thy commandments.” Do you know something of it? “I will run the way of Thy commandments.” “Then how willingly they move in the happy paths of love!” As he preached to the thousands in Samaria, he spoke the same to one man. “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” Then there was the baptism.

“A man under authority.” And then you have one of the strangest words in all the Bible. “A man under authority.” He has been led by the church, led by circumstances, he has been led by an angel, he has been led by the Holy Spirit. And now, “the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip,” and he “was found at Azotus,” about thirty or forty miles away. We know no reason for it, but for some reason he was lifted and transported and found miles away. The mystery of God’s sovereignty! You say, It is difficult for you to fit that in with the present day! Well, it is, but a lot of our ministers could tell some remarkable tales of when they were away preaching and it was almost impossible they could get home. Perhaps they have been stranded, the car has broken down, the train has broken down, or the snow is a few feet deep. How many have suddenly thought of this word. I remember Mr. F. L. Rowell, I think he had an engagement at Newcastle one day, Portsmouth the next, and I think there was a rail strike and a bus strike. I remember him thinking, “The Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip,” and he “was found at Azotus.” I rather think he got to Portsmouth alright. But in our little way I think some of us could tell a few little stories of when we were supplying the churches and some amazing ways when there were difficulties in getting home, but we did.

“A man under authority.” I suppose it must have been a solemn shock to Philip. You know what he did. He went on preaching Christ. “Passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.” He went right up that coast and wherever he went he preached Christ.

“A man under authority.” That is the end, is it? Not quite. This “man under authority” is mentioned once again in the Word of God (Acts 21). It was probably nearly twenty-four years later, and he is still at Caesarea twenty-four years later. In these few weeks we have been thinking about, he has been at Jerusalem, he has been in Samaria, he has been in the desert, he has been at Azotus, he has been at Caesarea. Is he never going to settle down? You find in twenty-four years he has settled down. He is still at Caesarea. He is still an honoured man. The Apostle Paul, journeying back to Jerusalem after his preaching, has to go through Caesarea with Luke and his other friends, and the obvious thing, there is a godly man, a hospitable home, and the Apostle Paul goes there and stays there a long time. It is nice to hear of this “man under authority” years later still continuing. And not only so, he has a good reputation, a godly family, four godly girls, and they were all virgins. They were not nuns, as the Roman Catholics say. They were still girls at home; they were not

married yet. That is what it means. But there is this loving home where Paul was able to go.

Well, you and I are not Philip. O but may we know what it is to be “under authority” – perhaps not an angel, but the authority of the Holy Spirit, the authority of God’s holy Word, the obedience of faith. “One is your Master, even Christ.” The sweet constraint of His dying love. “A man under authority.”