

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 245

If the Lord Will

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 19th September, 2004**

Text: *“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that” (James 4. 13-15).*

This expression at the beginning sounds rather strange to us: “Go to now.” It is not an expression we use. It is really a call to attention. It is really a call to listen, as if you looked through your window and saw someone trespassing in your garden. “Go to now.” You would say, “Hi there! What are you doing?” This is the point of it. We do not use this expression. James uses it once again at the beginning of chapter 5.

There are going to be some very solemn remarks, some very close remarks. There are going to be some rebukes, some fault finding. So this call right at the beginning to listen to what is going to be said. “Go to now.” We need that in our services sometimes, don’t we? Even if not literally asleep, it is very easy to get into a sleepy condition spiritually. Wake up now; listen now; “go to now.” Well, there are some important things, some close things he is going to say. He is going to find fault with their behaviour.

“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.” Now what was the fault? What was wrong with what they were saying? Well, the first thing, God was not in all their thoughts. There was no mention of God. Everything they were saying was completely carnal, completely worldly, completely selfish. They were making their plans, deciding what to do, and yet God is not in all their thoughts. It is just what they can get, just what they can gain.

What else was wrong with it? The sheer presumption of it. They are deciding whether it is today or whether it is tomorrow, and they are deciding what they are to do. But not just deciding to go to this city, but deciding exactly how long they are going to stop there – not thinking of any contingency, even naturally, not thinking they might be unwell, or

thinking something might happen. The sheer presumption of it! “And continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.” They are going to be completely successful, completely prosperous. They do not seem to realise that many a person has gone to a city, and that is alright, and stayed a year, and that is alright, but they certainly have not prospered and been successful in everything they do. It is the sheer presumption of it.

And what else? A third thing. All this preparation and all this thought about tomorrow, and all this thought about next year, and all this thought about the coming days, and not a single thought about eternity; preparing for tomorrow and next week, but not a single thought about eternity. Let me just pause to say this: God knew everything that they were saying. They were talking among themselves. They had not any thought of God. But there was the unseen Listener to their conversation. Do not forget that for every idle word God will call us into judgment. The Lord hears all our conversations – in our homes, with our friends, when we are out in the world, when we come to chapel, when we are going home from chapel, secret conversations, those little whispers. They were saying all these things: “To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there.” And God was listening to everything they said.

But just take it a little further. It almost seems to me that they were saying these things in their hearts. These were the things they were thinking. These were their secret plans. These things they were saying, they were not saying them openly or even to their friends. They were just saying them in their hearts. God on one occasion said this to His ancient people: “I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them.” Do you believe what you do believe? I do not think any one of us would like someone to stand up in front of this congregation and tell them all the thoughts that have been going through our minds this last twenty-four hours. But God knew all their thoughts, everything they were planning, and God knows all our thoughts. He says, “I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them.” Have you ever had to ask God to forgive you for the words you speak? And have you ever had to ask God to forgive you for the thoughts that you think? So this little rebuke. God is not in all their thoughts. The sheer presumption of it all, preparing for tomorrow, next week, next year, and not a thought about preparing for the day of death, preparing for eternity.

So of course that was the reason why I read to you from Luke 12 about that rich man. Now he actually was prospering, not like these in James 4 who presumptuously were taking it for granted they would. He *was* prospering. His ground brought forth plentifully. He was not having any bad harvests. Everything was going well, going right. “And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods.” Strangely, I once preached from this text in a farming community and there was a man in the congregation, so it transpired, and all the way to chapel he spent the time talking about how he needed bigger barns and about pulling down his barns and building greater. We do not seem to hear so much as we did ten or twenty years ago, about someone coming to chapel with something on their minds, good or bad, and the preacher mentioning it just as if he knew what they had been thinking. That seems to be part of the withholding from the church of God today.

You say, “What was wrong with that man pulling down his barns and building greater?” Let us be clear, there was nothing wrong at all with pulling down his barns and building greater. The point was, he was so concerned about his barns and he had not any concern about his never-dying soul; and he was making such wonderful preparation concerning the future, concerning his farm, but he had not any thought of preparing himself for the future when he must meet God.

The worst thing of all was this: “I will say to my soul” – he knew he had a soul; thousands do not. He thought about his soul, spoke about his soul. “I will say to *my soul*, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years.” This is terrible: “Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God...” Ah, God will always have the last word. “But God...” This man was taking no notice, but God was taking notice of him. “But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.” One day that will be said of you and me: this day, “this night thy soul shall be required of thee.” It will be a mercy if the Lord does not have to preface it by those two words: “Thou fool.” “Thou fool” – this day, “this night thy soul shall be required of thee.” But it will be “thou fool” unless by the grace of God we are made wise, made “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?”

Just one last thought about this rich farmer. He said, “What shall I do?” The great, the vital question, the question asked in the Acts of the Apostles: “What shall I do?” That jailer was just as wicked a man as this rich farmer. O but what made the difference? Sovereign, everlasting, electing love separated that jailer. The rich man said, “What shall I do?” And the jailer cried, “What must I do?” The one said, “What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?” And the other said, “What must I do to be saved?” And really that separates the whole human race and it separates this congregation, and it puts you and me on one side or the other. We are all saying, “What shall I do?” everyone of us. Of course we are. Are we saying, “What shall I do?” concerning all these earthly things, or are we saying, “What shall I do that I may be saved?”

“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour.” There were two solemn things with these who were speaking in the Epistle of James. The first was they did not know whether they would be permitted to do what they were planning – whether they would be unwell, or whether they would be stopped, or whether there would be some change of plans. They did not know that. But secondly, says the apostle, they did not know whether they would even be alive. That is it: we do not know what turns of providence, what circumstances there might be. But above it all, we do not know whether we will still be here, whether we will still be alive.

One thing that hit me, it would be in the early 1960s. I was preaching at Haslingden. It was the end of December and it was a severe winter. The roads were terribly icy, and that particular Saturday evening there was a dense fog. One of the friends at chapel had a lady who had been for tea, and after tea the man said to his wife, “I will just take her to the bus stop. I will be back in a few moments.” He never did arrive back home. He was killed at a zebra crossing at the bottom of the street where I lived. I remember that solemn time. I took his funeral and I preached either the Lord’s day after his death or the Lord’s day after the funeral, and it was either this: “Ye know not what shall be on the morrow,” or else the similar word in the Proverbs: “Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”

Well, you may say, “But is it not right to prepare? Is it not right to make plans?” Of course it is right to make plans; of course it is right to prepare. But not presumptuously; only subject to the will of God. We are told to prepare. In the Book of the Proverbs the wise man points to the ants as an example of wisdom, how they prepare for the winter – how we should make our plans, how we should prepare. There is nothing wrong in making plans; we have to make plans. It is foolish not to make plans. There used to be a saying about, and there still is, and I want to speak carefully, but I am not sure it is altogether scriptural or right: we should live every day as if it were our last. Now I know what people mean by that expression. As one of our old deacons used to say at the prayer meeting, “Let my dying day be my daily companion.” But in one sense we do not have to live every day as if it were to be our last. We have things in our diaries and we have to make provision for tomorrow and things next week. What is the right way of planning and making provision? Well, completely subject to the will of God and realising that we are subject to the will of God, realising our frailty, realising our complete dependence. We could not breathe one single, further breath apart from God’s permission. All things by prayer, committing all things into the Lord’s hand, seeking to know His will, asking Him to overturn it if it is not right, asking Him to establish it and to bless it if it is right.

“Ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” So we do not know what there might be tomorrow, or next week, or the coming year. We do not know what changes there might be in our circumstances, in our health, in our family. We do not know how our plans may be overturned. But the second thing the Lord says, we do not know whether we shall even still be here, whether we shall still be alive. “For what is your life? It is even a vapour.” You have seen a kettle boiling. You have seen a puff of steam, and a few seconds later it is not there, and not all the power on earth and not all the scientific inventions can ever bring that puff of steam back. You will never see it again as long as you live. There is the analogy very simply. That is your life and mine. It is just like that puff of smoke, that puff of steam coming from the kettle. It is here and it is gone. “What is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” The great thing is to be made ready, made right, made “meet to be partakers of the inheritance

of the saints in light,” clothed in the Saviour’s righteousness, washed in His precious blood. This life is “but for a moment.”

It is said that when Christianity came to Anglo-Saxon Britain, people were discussing its merits and demerits and there was an old Anglo-Saxon thane, an old nobleman. He said, “Our lives seem to me something like this. We are in our great hall.” They used to have the great hall where they used to meet. “It is just as if it is a bitterly cold day and the fire is blazing and a tiny bird comes in one side and hovers about for a moment and then flies out the other side.” He said, “If these people can tell us what happens when our little lives are ended, then this is important. Let us listen to what they have to say.” So there was a lot of good wisdom in the old Anglo-Saxon thane’s speech.

“What is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” But if it is allowed that we shall still be here, that our lives will still be continued, “Ye know not what shall be on the morrow.... For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” No doubt you notice when I read the notices every Lord’s day morning and evening, I always begin like this: “If the Lord will.” I know that almost everyone uses the expression, “God willing.” I would never make a person an offender for a word, but why do I not say, “God willing”? Well, because Scripture tells me, “Ye *ought* to say, If the Lord will.” So quite simply I do what Scripture tells me. But I like the expression; I think it is a lovely expression: “If the Lord will,” rather than, “God willing.” If you asked a little boy if he could come to your house, wouldn’t it be much nicer if he said, “If it is all right with my father,” or, “If my father lets me,” rather than saying, “I will come, my father willing”? Now I say that just in passing by. But for many, many years I have felt what a beautiful expression this is, and not just to say it casually, but really to mean it, really to feel it.

“Ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” For, “Ye know not what shall be on the morrow.” I am sure some of you, if not many of you, have heard that story that Mr. Collier [pastor at Bethel Strict Baptist Chapel, Linslade, from 1942-1984] used to tell. Many years ago, when he was a boy, he was travelling by train with his father. It was a long journey, and part of the way on the journey they had to change trains. His father bought a postcard and started writing it to send it back home, and Mr. Collier as a boy said, “Father, put on it that we have arrived

safely. It will save us the trouble of writing when we get there.” His father rebuked him. He said, “Why not? There isn’t anything can stop us, is there?” They never did arrive safely. Further on that journey, Mr. Collier’s father had a stroke and had to be taken to hospital. There at that hospital, Mr. Collier said he had one of the most miserable days of his life, and then he had to catch the train back. So they never did arrive at their destination. Coming back, the train passed through the station where the day before he had said, “Well nothing really can stop us getting there, can it?” And that incident had a profound effect upon him the whole of his life.

“Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow.... For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” Sometimes it will be *this* that you are planning to do, and the Lord has ordained that it shall be *that*; and sometimes it will be *that* that you are planning to do, and the Lord has ordained that it shall be *this*.

“Ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” O how many there are who presumptuously have said what they are going to do and they have never done it! I am sure you can think of very many of them, even in Scripture. Pharaoh pursuing after Israel. He said, “I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil.” He never did; he perished in the waters of the Red Sea. Sennacherib, O those terrible things he said he was going to do and how he mocked King Hezekiah! His army was annihilated and he himself was murdered by his own children. You can go right through Scripture. What did King Saul say he was going to do to David? It is a very blessed and sacred truth: the everlasting safety and security of the people of God. Satan cannot do anything if it is contrary to God’s will. The wicked cannot do anything if it is contrary to God’s will. How often down the ages there have been enemies of the Lord’s people and they have been planning to do this, and they have had their plans so clear, and they are certain what they are going to do, but God is not in all their thoughts. “Ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that,” because if it is not the Lord’s will, we shall never do it.

“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.” Now even God’s people can get into a wrong spirit in these things, a presumptuous spirit in these things, a careless spirit in these things, a casual spirit in these things. Sometimes the Lord solemnly awakens us:

“Go to now, ye that say” these things. “Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow.... For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” But with the Lord’s dear people, how often the Lord frustrates their plans, overturns their desires, and He does it in a way of love and a way of mercy.

Of course, the great example of this is Saul of Tarsus. He was determined what he was going to do. He was saying, “To day or tomorrow we will go into such a city” – Damascus – and we will do all this. But the Lord had a purpose of love and mercy to him. He overturned the will of Saul of Tarsus and accomplished the will of Almighty God in heaven. So it is with all the heirs of bliss. How many of them are determined to give up going to chapel, determined to have their own way, determined to go on in their sin, determined to fulfil ambition, determined to be prosperous? “Ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.” O but the will of God in the covenant of grace, love and mercy towards unworthy people!

“There *is* a period known to God
When all His sheep, redeemed by blood,
Shall leave the hateful ways of sin,
Turn to the fold, and enter in.”

How many have had to look back and see that God’s will was better than their will! That German hymnwriter wrote, “Thou sweet, beloved will of God.” “Why was I made to hear Thy voice?” I was saying, “Today or tomorrow I will go into city and do this or that,” but the Lord had purposes of love and mercy toward me.

“Why was I made to hear Thy voice,
And enter while there’s room;
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?”

And then so often in the lives of the Lord’s people, unexpected things, often sad things, accidents, trials, perplexities, disappointments. We planned one thing; the Lord planned another. We were thinking that such a thing would be right; the Lord had determined otherwise. Well, in all this the Lord never makes a mistake. He never did; He never will. O but what a trial it is to the Lord’s people so often – things they have thought of, things they have planned, innocent things, things that seemed

right, things that even seemed to be for the praise, honour and glory of God. Now why has this taken place? The Lord gives no account of His matters. But the Lord so often overturns the will of His people and establishes His own. “By His saints it stands confessed” – often not at the time, but later – “By His saints it stands confessed, that what He does is ever best.”

O what a word this is – the mystery of divine providence, the will of God being fulfilled, the overturning of the will of the ungodly, often the overturning even of the will of His beloved people – now what a word is this: “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

What is the conclusion of it – as the Puritans would have said, the application of it? Well, it is to seek to live a life of submission to the will of God, a life of faith and prayer, a life of seeking to do His will, a life of dependence, and in *everything* “commit thy way” – what you are thinking about tomorrow and next week and the coming year, *thy way* – “commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring *it* to pass.” And what is that *it*? Well really it is His own will and purpose for you, which is not always what you seek or what you would like, but which is always best, always for the honour and glory of His name, always for your real, lasting, eternal good. “Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.”