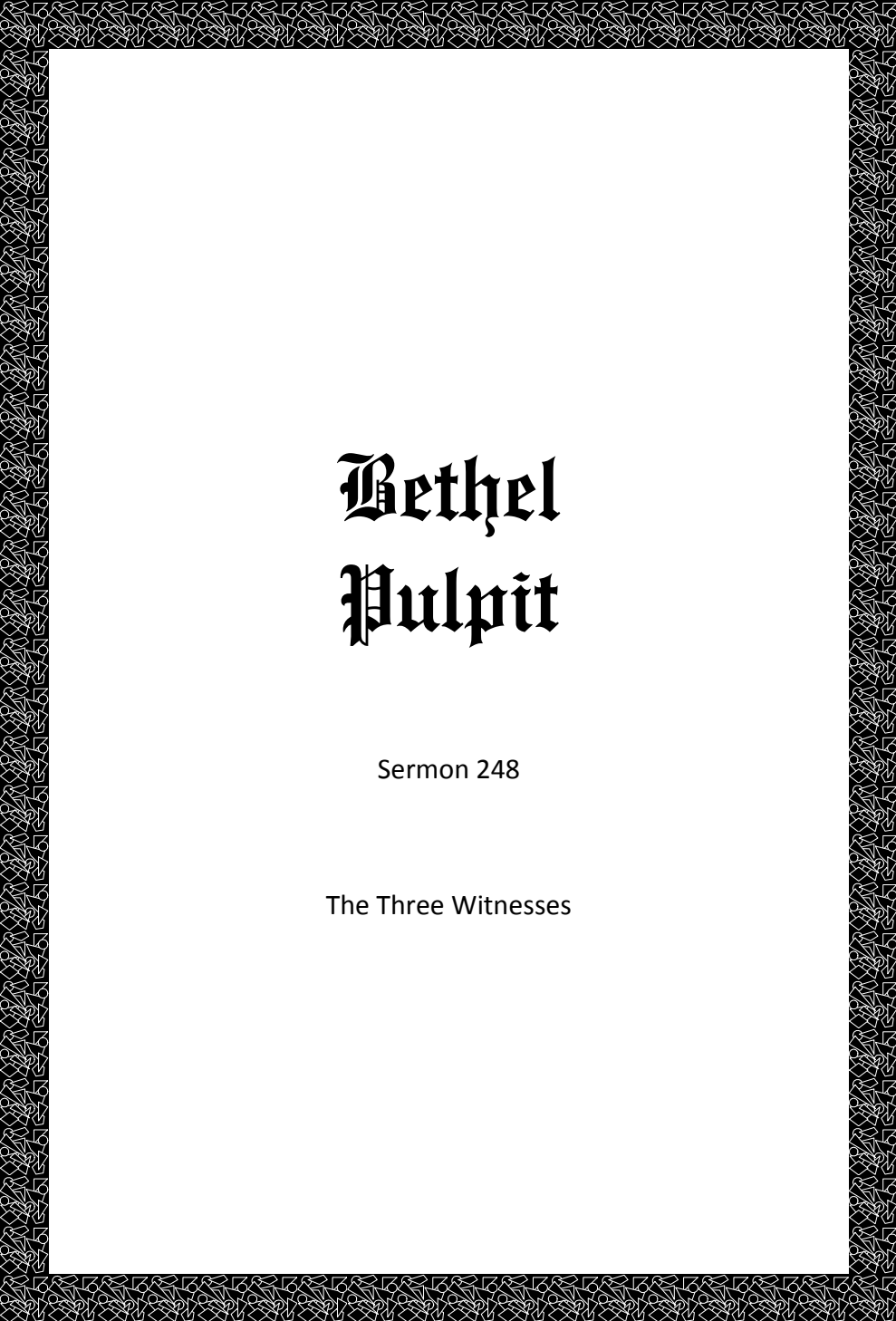




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 248

The Three Witnesses

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 8th January, 2006**

Text: *“And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one” (1 John 5. 8).*

John writes as a very aged man. His Epistles are some of the last writings in the New Testament. The other disciples were all dead and it was a day of difficulty and persecution, and worse than that, error beginning to enter the early church. One thing that stands out in John's Epistle surely is this: how he emphasised the certainty of the things we believe. You must have noticed that John's Epistles are so different from any other part of the Word of God – so different from Paul's Epistles, so different from Peter's Epistles. They give such an emphasis on these things concerning the Lord Jesus being right, these things being certain. It is not just imagination. John was there. He knew the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He heard His words. He knew of His death. He saw His glorious resurrection. The certainty of these things! Beloved friends, “We have not followed cunningly devised fables.” It is a wonderful thing if we realise in our hearts the certainty of these things we believe.

Now perhaps you have noticed that John, in speaking of divine certainties, again and again speaks of a witness, or a record, or a testimony. In the Old Testament there was such an emphasis that if there were any point and people argued about it or disagreed with it, in the mouth of two or three witnesses it had to be established. If two honest people could say they had seen something and knew it happened, and if they were joined by a third and he said he knew it happened, then it was to be believed.

So you notice the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ a few times spoke of it in His own life. You remember also that the Lord Jesus emphasised it concerning the church of God. If there was a case of some member of a church accused of doing something wrong or having a dispute with a fellow-member, well first of all the person has to see them alone; but if this is not satisfactory, then there must be two or three others who must come. There seems to be that emphasis right through the Old Testament and the New of something being established in the mouth of two or three witnesses.

Well then, John takes up this point concerning the glorious Person of the Son of God, His coming to earth, who He is and what He has done. First of all, He calls on the three Witnesses in heaven. “There are Three that bear record in heaven” – bear record that Jesus is the Son of God, bear record that He is almighty, bear record to His glorious work. “There are Three that bear record in heaven.” God the eternal Father. We think of how at the baptism of the Lord Jesus He bore record from heaven: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” The Father. We think again of the Mount of Transfiguration: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him.” Of course, there were the three witnesses there: Peter, James and John. The Father – we think of His witness from heaven when He raised His beloved Son from the dead and so declared Him “to be the Son of God with power ... by the resurrection from the dead.”

“There are Three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word,” or the Son of God, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Himself. You notice that John uses this expression of the Lord Jesus. He does in his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” The Word, the One through whom the Father speaks; the Word, the One through whom the Godhead is made known. “There are Three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost.” O what a record the Son of God bore whilst here upon earth concerning Himself, His Person, His relationship to the Father, His ministry!

“There are Three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost.” In the covenant of grace the Holy Ghost with the Father and the Son bearing record; in everything: the Holy Ghost in creation, in the conception and birth of the Saviour, in His death and in His resurrection.

“There are Three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these Three are One.” Co-equal, not one superior to another; co-eternal; co-essential, all of the same essence. Three glorious Persons but one God. The mystery of the Trinity and yet,

“A truth from nature never learned,
That Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
To save our souls are all concerned.”

The Father choosing His people, the Son redeeming them, the Holy Ghost applying the work of salvation.

“There are Three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these Three are One.” But then if there are three Witnesses in heaven, there are three witnesses on earth, and I want to try to speak to you this morning about the three witnesses. This is something deep, solemn, vital. The three witnesses on earth.

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood.” I would just say this perhaps to our young people. Value the commentators and the godly writers, but never be bound by them. I have felt the great Dr. Gill is really in error here and really ridiculous. He says the three witnesses on earth – the Spirit, that means the Word of God; the water, that means baptism; the blood, that means the death of the martyrs, or it could possibly mean the Lord’s supper. Well, there was an old proverb that “even Homer nods.” We can learn a lot from the godly writers, but never be bound by them.

I take the Spirit here to be the Holy Spirit of God, because just before this we read (verse 6): “And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth,” and almost immediately afterwards, “There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit.” Now where does the Holy Spirit bear witness on earth? It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to Christ, to bear witness to who He is, to bear witness to what He has done, to bear witness to His glorious work of salvation. Where does the Holy Spirit witness on earth? Well, first of all He witnesses *in the Word of God*. Never forget that the Word of God is divinely inspired by the Spirit of God. “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” So it is an infallible record. There is no mistake. It is inerrant: there is no possibility of any mistake. What did the Lord Jesus say of the holy Scriptures? “They are they which testify of Me.” And in the holy Scriptures the Spirit of God bears witness in the earth concerning Christ. When you read the Word of God, that is a good prayer:

“Divine Instructor, gracious Lord,
Be Thou for ever near;
Teach me to love Thy sacred Word,
And find the Saviour there.”

“They are they which testify of Me,” says the Lord Jesus. We need that same, dear Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures of truth to open them to our understanding, to lead us into them, to teach us through the Scriptures, to apply them to our heart, and especially to lead us to the Saviour there.

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood.” But then the Holy Spirit bears witness on earth *in the preaching of the gospel*. Apart from the Holy Spirit’s witness, we may as well close the chapel and stop preaching and go home. I can speak words; I trust they are right words, scriptural words. But only the Holy Spirit can bear that witness to the gospel, and we trust that is what He has done here at Bethel over the years and what we still pray that He might do, that He will do.

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood.” But especially the Spirit witnesses on earth *in the hearts of the people of God*. The same Holy Spirit who bears witness in the Word, the same Holy Spirit who bears witness in the gospel, He bears witness in the hearts of all His people, and that is what we need. You can study theology all your life and then you may be tried on it and deny it, but if the Holy Spirit once witnesses to a truth in your heart, it is there and it is there for ever. That is why the martyrs went to the stake. That is why they were burnt to ashes, not accepting deliverance. The Holy Spirit had borne witness in their hearts and they could not deny it. We do want the Holy Spirit to bear witness in our hearts.

There will be a few things. He will bear witness that you are a sinner, that what it says in the Bible is true, that you have sinned and come short of the glory of God. You are not fit to meet your Maker. You are not prepared to die. The Holy Spirit will bear witness on earth concerning this. He will bear witness concerning the judgment day, the solemnity of eternity. He will bring your sins before you, bring you to judgment. The Holy Spirit will bear witness with your spirit of your complete helplessness and utter inability to save your soul. But then the Holy Spirit in your heart will bear witness to the Saviour, bring you to seek the Saviour. “Dost Thou not dwell in all the saints, and seal them heirs of heaven?” To bear witness with your spirit, in your heart, to lead you to the Saviour, to teach you how to pray, enable you to cast all your hope on Him and in greater or less measure bear witness to your spirit that you are a child of God, an heir of bliss. That is the great need in the church of God today, the witness of

the Holy Spirit to Christ on earth in the hearts of sinners. And so that prayer,

“Assure my conscience of her part
In the Redeemer’s blood;
And bear Thy witness with my heart,
That I am born of God.”

This is vital, the Holy Spirit’s witness to Christ on earth in the hearts of sinners.

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood.” When we come to the water and the blood, of course we tread on sacred ground and, like Moses, “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” This takes us to Calvary. This takes us to the cross. No doubt you must have noticed that in the four accounts of the crucifixion, the account of John is very different. As John comes right to the end of that solemn account of the crucifixion, there was one thing which specially struck him, and he speaks of it so emphatically: “Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that He was dead already, they brake not His legs.” Now this is it: “But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.” Now the other evangelists do not mention it, but it seems to have made a most awful and powerful and solemn impression on the beloved disciple John. “One of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.” He writes more emphatically of this almost than anything that is emphasised in Scripture. “And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.” It seemed to make such an awful, solemn, lasting impression on John. “And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.” And now as he writes as an aged man, just before he comes to these words I have read as a text, he says of the Lord Jesus, “This is He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood” (verse 6).

And then he goes on: “And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.” The Lord’s people have always seen that solemn significance, the twofold effect of the death of Christ, and these things cannot be separated –

the precious, precious blood that makes an atonement for sin, that reconciles a sinner to God, that opens a fountain for sin and for uncleanness, that makes a new and living way to heaven. “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.” But then the water, the sanctifying effect of the death of Christ. Those who are saved are saved by the blood of Christ, on no other ground, sinners with no hope but in His precious blood – but you cannot separate the blood from the water or the water from the blood: a sinner forgiven, a sinner washed in the blood of Christ, but then there will be that sanctifying effect in his life. There will be that gracious effect. There will be that cleansing effect. There will be a separation from his past life. There will be a separation from the world. There will be a separation to God. There will be a walking in His fear. That is what John meant in that striking statement: “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not.” He does not mean that person never does anything wrong. He does not mean that person never commits any sin. God’s people know their own hearts. They know they do sin. “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not.” His life will be different. There will be a complete change. He will not live in sin. He will not go on in the ways of his past life. There will be a difference. There will be that gracious change. There will be that sanctifying effect.

“And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood.” Notice how carefully holy Scripture speaks: “These three *agree* in one.” Concerning Father, Son and Holy Ghost: “These Three *are* One.” But how carefully holy Scripture speaks! The Spirit, the water, the blood – well, you cannot say, “These three *are* one.” They are not. They are different; they are distinguished; they are separate. You cannot say, “These three *are* one.” But you can say this: “These three *agree* in one.” You cannot separate the blood from the water. You cannot separate justification from sanctification. You cannot separate a guilty sinner washed in the blood of Christ from that sinner walking tenderly before His Lord and Saviour, constrained by love in newness of life. You cannot separate the Holy Spirit from any of these things. These are deep, solemn, sacred truths, but they are vital.

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.” Toplady’s “Rock of Ages” is almost the best known of English hymns, and yet so few really understand how Toplady refers to this verse here and sweetly, simply opens up the meaning:

“Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.”

“The Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.”
Joseph Hart very, very similarly:

“This fountain so dear, He’ll freely impart;
Unlocked by the spear, it gushed from His heart,
With blood and with water; the first to atone,
To cleanse us the latter; the fountain’s but one.”

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.” Well, let me speak of the blood first. It bears witness in earth, and the witness it bears in earth is this: that

“The vilest sinner out of hell,
Who lives to feel his need,
Is welcome to a Throne of Grace,
The Saviour’s blood to plead.”

That is the witness the blood of Christ bears here upon earth. Now what a witness, a witness made known in the Word and a witness made known in the gospel! That the vilest of sinners have found salvation through the blood of Christ. In the Old Testament there was so much about the blood and the water, the water and the blood. Yet it could neither save nor sanctify. But when the incarnate Son of God shed His precious blood at Calvary, then the whole ransomed church of God was saved to sin no more. And down the ages what a witness this has been on earth, in the gospel, to poor, lost, ruined, guilty, perishing souls, that there is a fountain and that the blood of Christ does cleanse from all sin, and “sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.”

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.” But the great thing we need, the three agreeing in one, the blood witnessing on earth, with the Spirit and the blood witnessing together in a guilty sinner’s heart, “Thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven.” That is really the prayer we sometimes sing in the hymn:

“Spirit of truth, come down,
Reveal the things of God;
O make to us salvation known,
And witness with the blood.”

That is the witness in a guilty sinner’s heart that he will get to heaven, that his sins are forgiven, that he is saved with an everlasting salvation. It is through the blood of Christ and it is through the blood of Christ alone. No hope, no salvation, no heaven apart from the blood. That is why in glory the redeemed to all eternity sing, “Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood ... to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.”

“There are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.” Now you cannot separate the water from the blood. You cannot separate justification from sanctification. Those whom the Lord saves, He sanctifies. So we have that beautiful word concerning the death of Christ: “Wherefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach.” It means this, that whatever profession a person makes of his salvation, his hope, if he does not know what the apostle calls “the washing of water by the Word,” the sanctifying effect of the death of Christ, if it is not evidenced in his life, then that man’s religion is vain. These two must go together. You cannot separate them.

“The Spirit, and the water, and the blood.” But the water is applied by the Spirit of God in sanctification. A sinner with an interest in the death of Christ, how he dies to his sin, and how he dies to his past life, and how he dies to any hope apart from Jesus, and how he lives to God, and how he feels something of the power of His resurrection, and how he knows the sweet constrainings of the love of Christ! In himself he feels so vile and sinful and unworthy and guilty, but he cannot go on in the ways of sin. He cannot go on in the ways of his past life. He wants to honour his Lord and Saviour. Sweetly constrained by love, he longs to walk worthy. He does not want to dishonour that worthy name, the name of Jesus, by which he is called. If he could choose, he would never sin again. That is the water and the blood, not the blood without the water. When he does sin, he does not make excuses, and he does not say, “Well I am a saved sinner, so it doesn’t matter.” The water makes his heart soft, his conscience tender, and so in

humble repentance and in contrition he has to come again and again praying not just that he might escape hell, not just that he might reach heaven, but confessing sin against a loving Saviour, begging to be forgiven, praying to be kept from falling, begging that he might not be left to grieve and dishonour the Saviour he loves so much, who has done so much for him.

“These three agree in one.” If your religion is real, in measure you will know what I am speaking about: the Spirit, the water and the blood. They will not be called hard, dry doctrines. They will not be things you will leave in chapel when you go home. They will be a witness in your heart, a witness to your need of these things, the reality of these things. There will be a witness to the blood – your only plea, your only ground of acceptance. There will be a witness to the water – O that desire to walk in newness of life to the praise and the honour and the glory of God. Well, beloved friends, may you and I not be strangers to these things.

“And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.”