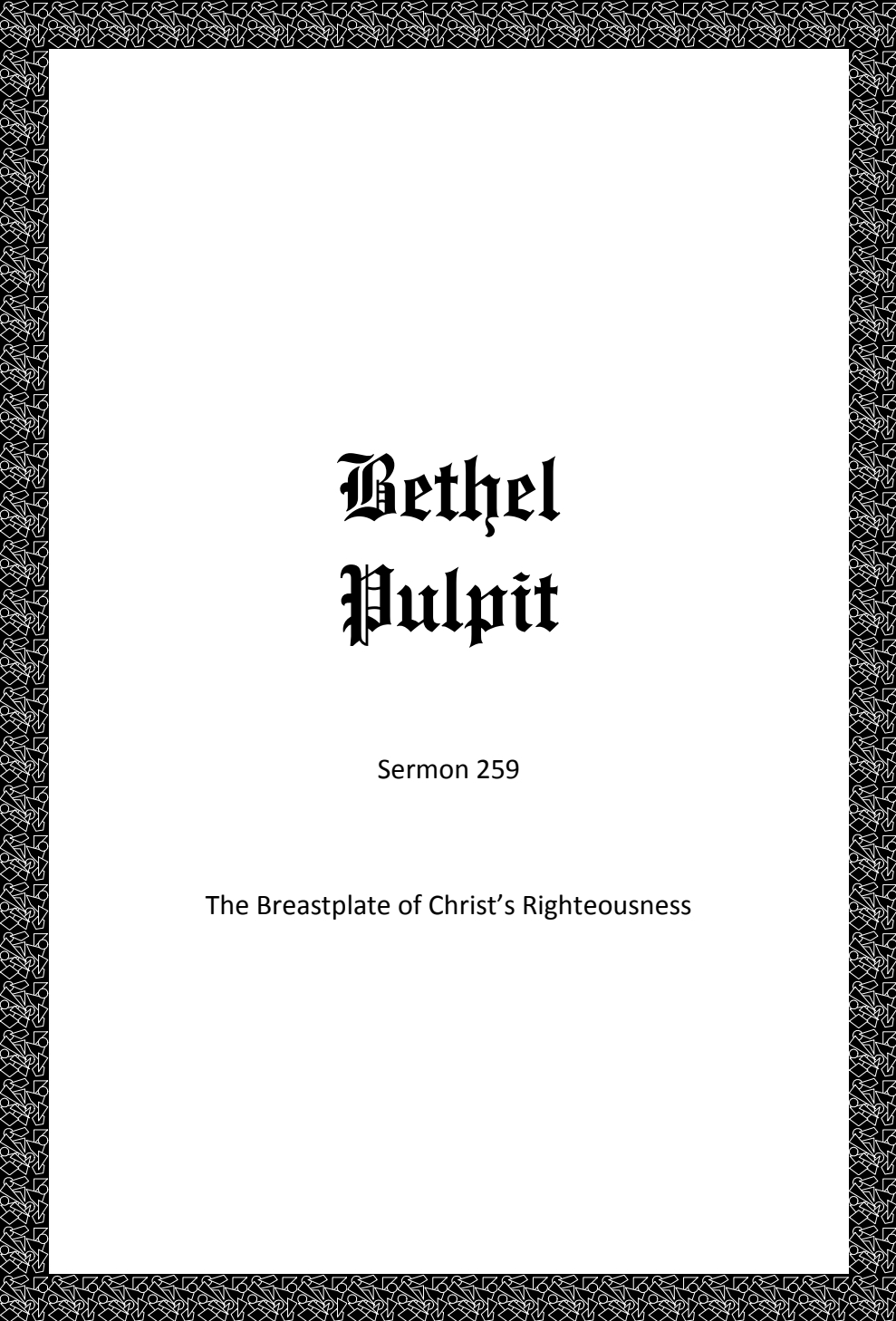




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 259

The Breastplate of Christ's Righteousness

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 26th November, 2006**

Text: *"Having on the breastplate of righteousness" (Ephesians 6. 14).*

Paul compares the Christian life to a struggle, a conflict, and it is vital that Christians should have a suit of armour. "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day." And then Paul goes through this armour piece by piece and explains what it is.

Here, "Having on the breastplate of righteousness." Now the way I should like to try to open this up this evening with God's help is something like this: first of all to speak of what this righteousness is that Paul is speaking about. "The breastplate of righteousness." And then secondly in what ways this righteousness can be spoken of as a breastplate, compared to a breastplate. "The breastplate of righteousness." And then to say a few things about this conflict of the believer with sin and Satan and self and the world. "Having on the breastplate of righteousness."

Beloved friends, this is Christ's righteousness which is imputed to every child of God, to every true believer. To *impute* means to reckon to somebody's account something they do not themselves have. We do not have any righteousness of our own. God's people have the righteousness of Christ reckoned to their account, imputed to them. And of course, the opposite: Christ who has no sin, "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners," He has the sins of all His people imputed to Him. He dies for them, He bears them, He bears them away. Really, this is the foundation of all real religion; it is the foundation of our hope; it is the foundation of salvation; it is the foundation of the gospel, and it was the glorious truth of the great Reformation, to be justified through the righteousness of Christ. Luther said this is the article by which the church of God stands or falls.

Well then, I will try to be very simple this evening, because these things are vital. Almighty God is righteous. We have that on almost every page of Scripture. He is righteous in Himself. He is righteous in all His works. He is righteous in all His ways. A righteous God. God the Father

is righteous. God the Son is righteous. God the Holy Ghost is righteous. Now when God created man, when He created Adam, He gave him a righteous law. He created Adam righteous and He demanded he should continue righteous. He gave him a righteous law. Really it was this: Do this and thou shalt live; do it not, and dying thou shalt surely die. Now Adam disobeyed God. Adam became unrighteous. And every son and daughter of Adam, that is the whole human race, is born unrighteous, continues unrighteous, lives unrighteous, and apart from God's grace, dies unrighteous. But God still demands that all His creatures, every one of them, shall be righteous. He has given a perfect, holy, righteous law. You say, We have not the ability to obey. But God has not lost His perfect right to command.

So each of us born in this world are born under the righteous law of a righteous God. Really the sum and substance of it is the ten commandments. Our conscience bears witness that the ten commandments are righteous and true and good. I have never known anyone who says, Well, they are bad laws. The world generally accepts the ten commandments. If there is a God, He must be obeyed; He must be honoured and worshipped, and none other. Here is a forbidding of theft and adultery and covetousness. We must not take God's name in vain. We must honour parents. It is righteous and good and just. But as we read this evening (Romans chapter 3), Jew and Gentile, the whole human race, are unrighteous, have broken God's righteous law. Now in giving His righteous law, God declared that those who fail to bring that righteousness He seeks shall be condemned; they shall be punished. No sinner has ever brought that righteousness. Then must all be punished? Must all perish in their sin? Must all fall under condemnation?

Now we see the wonderful purpose of God from all eternity in the covenant of grace. He was determined to have a people who would be righteous, and because they are righteous will be with Him in heaven for ever and ever. Well, how can they be righteous if they have no righteousness? That is really the great reason why the Son of God came to earth, why the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem. He was born under that holy, righteous law of His Father, even though He is Himself true almighty God. And in His holy, spotless life here on earth He perfectly obeyed that righteous law, and so He has that perfect righteousness, and in the wonderful, gracious transactions of God, that perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus is reckoned to the account of His people who have no

righteousness of their own. It is given to them; it is reckoned to their account. What of their sins? They are reckoned to the account of Jesus. And so having lived that righteous life, He bears His people's sins and He bears them away so that a righteous God through His righteous Son can look on a wretched, lost, ruined, guilty sinner and declare him righteous in Christ. Why, He does not look at the sinner; He looks at the Saviour and at the perfections of the Saviour. He looks at His righteousness, and to this guilty, lost sinner who has been brought to trust in Jesus, the Father says, "Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee." He has never "beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel."

I have tried this evening to speak as simply as I can: what righteousness is, and how it is possible that sinners can be made righteous. This is the only hope of heaven, the only title for heaven, the only way to heaven. If you will, then, this is the doctrine of imputed righteousness. A sinner is justified, a sinner is declared righteous, not through himself, his works good or bad, but through the righteousness of Jesus in which he hopes, in which he trusts. Now I have tried to be as simple as I can. I hope it has not been hard and dry doctrine.

Now then, let us come to the experience of this. By nature we live in this world and whether our lives are outwardly evil or whether we are chapel attenders, in the sight of God we come short. "*All* have sinned" – *all* – "and come short of the glory of God." But we do not know it. But when the Lord begins to deal with you and me, in greater or less measure He will teach us this: "My best is stained and dyed with sin; my all is nothing worth." So in the great day when I die, when I meet my Maker, when I appear before the judgment seat, how can I stand? My righteousness will not do. So what do I have to do? To renounce my own righteousness for ever, to cast it away "to the moles and to the bats," to be willing to be saved by a righteousness which is not mine, which belongs to another, even God's dear Son. Doesn't it sound easy! It is the hardest thing there is in real religion, for you and me to get rid of our own creature righteousness, covenant of works righteousness, that righteousness which will not avail. It clings to us like the skin to our body. To be stripped of your own righteousness is like someone trying to strip the skin off your body.

I think over the years I have told you the story of James Hervey of Weston Favell (part of Northampton now). In the church of God he has

been accounted the great writer on imputed righteousness. As a young vicar at Weston Favell, he was quite happy and comfortable in his own righteousness. James Hervey died young. He had that incurable disease – they called it consumption, though we call it T.B. today. They thought the best remedy then was to breathe in the scent of upturned earth. So James Hervey morning by morning went out in the fields with a poor old ploughman, and as the ploughman ploughed and the earth was upturned, Hervey breathed in the smell. It did not really do him any good, because he died young, but spiritually it did him good. This old ploughman was a godly man. He did not go to church; he went to chapel. James Hervey thought it would be good to have some religious conversation and put the question, “What is the hardest thing in real religion?” The ploughman said, “Sir, I am a poor man; you are the vicar; you tell me.” Hervey said, “It is to deny our sins.” The ploughman said, “Sir, I beg to differ. There is one thing that is harder than to deny your own sins: it is to deny your own righteousness.” That was like an arrow from heaven in the poor vicar’s heart.

O but to be brought to deny our own righteousness! You know what the Word of God calls your supposed goodness and my supposed goodness, your righteousness and mine. It calls them *filthy rags*. “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags,” the point, the analogy, being this. You are going to an important place to meet an important person. You must be suitably attired; you must be well dressed. In modern parlance, you must be smart. It is a terrible thing to find what you are wearing is filthy, and not just filthy, but rags. What would a person do if he realised he was wearing filthy rags? Well, as soon as possible he would seek to get rid of them, have a bath, and then and only then could he come to his appointment. It is a simple analogy and it is one from Scripture. You and I have an appointment and it is an appointment you cannot cancel. We often have appointments and there is something important and we cancel it. “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” That appointment must be kept. We must meet our Maker. O how solemn to go in the filthy rags of our own righteousness! O but to be led and taught by the Holy Spirit really to feel, “My best is stained and dyed with sin; my all is nothing worth.” Then, I renounce it for ever as my hope and I flee to the righteousness of Jesus.

When you get home, read through the Epistle to the Philippians chapter 3. Paul there tells us personally how he learned this lesson of

righteousness. He tells us that by nature nobody was more good, more holy, more righteous, more obedient, more self-satisfied than he was. He said that if any could have confidence in themselves, he could more, religiously, ceremonially, outwardly. “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews” – he had every qualification. “As touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” Now what happened on the road to Damascus? Well, it was as if the Lord demolished the whole of Paul’s religion, and there he was a lost, ruined, guilty sinner in all the filthy rags of his own righteousness. So what then? “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung” – that is his best; he counts it as dung, filth – “that I may win Christ, and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness” – that is filthy rags; that is the dung – “not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: that I may know Him.”

That is where the Holy Spirit in the new birth brings every sinner saved by grace: to renounce your own righteousness, to flee for refuge to the righteousness of Jesus, to rest on the righteousness of Jesus alone, to be justified by faith in Christ’s righteousness. In a word it is this:

“No more, my God, I boast no more
Of all the duties I have done;
I quit the hopes I held before,
To trust the merits of Thy Son.

“The best obedience of my hands
Dares not appear before Thy throne;
But faith can answer Thy demands,
By pleading what my Lord has done.”

That, beloved friends, is the religion and the only religion that will take a guilty sinner to heaven, that will take you and me to heaven, to be trusting completely in the righteousness of Christ, our only hope, our only plea, to stand in Christ’s righteousness, to stand on Christ’s righteousness. Then what of our sins? If Christ’s righteousness is reckoned to our account, it means our sins were once reckoned to Him and in His death they were for

ever put away. This then is the righteousness here spoken of, the only righteousness worth speaking about.

If you read John Bunyan, do not just read his *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan wrote on this glorious doctrine of imputed righteousness, and Bunyan, as well as being deep doctrinally and a good theologian, is very simple and very quaint. He says, "The holy Word of God declares, 'He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none.'" He says, "The Lord Jesus has two coats. He has a wonderful righteousness which was His always, eternally, because He is the Son of God. But He came to this earth and lived a holy, spotless life. So He has His righteousness as God, but He has His righteousness as Man. He has two righteousnesses. He does not need two. He is like the man with two coats. 'Let Him impart to him that hath none.'" His poor, unworthy people are like the poor man who has no coat and the Saviour has two: His righteousness from eternity and His righteousness of obedience to the law. So what does He do? He that has two coats gives to him that has none. This is the righteousness of Christ, our only hope, our only plea.

Here Paul says, "Having on the breastplate of righteousness." Why should Christ's righteousness be spoken of as a breastplate? Well, when a soldier in ancient times went into battle, the most important piece of his armour was the breastplate. Why? Because it covered his heart. He might be wounded in his hand or wounded in his leg, but if his heart could be kept safe – so those breastplates were made. They were exceedingly strong, such strong metal and sometimes leather as well, and layer upon layer. If I can use the word, if you understand what I mean, those breastplates were *impenetrable*. That arrow had a good aim, but it could not penetrate the breastplate, and that javelin that was thrown, however sharp, could not penetrate that breastplate. So with that sword thrust, it could not get through that breastplate. If you will, the breastplate was what came between the blow aimed at the person and the person sheltering behind the breastplate, the person who was wearing it, and it interposed, it stopped the blow. We think of that lovely little hymn: "He, to save my soul from danger, *interposed* His precious blood," and His precious righteousness. It comes between the sinner's heart and that terrible blow that is aimed at him.

Now as long as he has that breastplate of righteousness, it must cover his heart and cover it completely, and it must be strong enough. If it

is not strong, it will not do. Our righteousness is of no avail. All our religious activities are of no avail. But that righteousness of Christ, His people's breastplate is so strong. Satan cannot penetrate it. The arrows, the javelins, the sword cannot penetrate it. If the Christian soldier is wearing the breastplate, he is safe because his heart, the vital point, is completely covered, completely safe. In a sense he is sheltering behind it. In a sense he is hiding behind it. So the breastplate is the most important piece of armour of all.

I know what some of you are going to say, those who read your Bibles carefully, who study the Word of God like the noble Bereans. You are going to say, If the breastplate is most important, why is it not put first? Why is it put second? What is the answer to that? Do you know what comes first? "Having your loins girt about with truth." That is (would you say?) sanctified common sense. Really that is not a piece of armour at all. But a soldier's tunic might hang down, it might get entangled, it might trip him up, so the first thing of all before he goes into battle is to gird up his loins, to have it securely fastened. That is why it comes first. It does not matter what armour he has if he is going to stumble and fall. "Having your loins girt about with truth." You need your loins girt up. "Gird up your loins." There is only one thing will gird them and that is the truth as in Jesus.

O but this breastplate, how substantial it is, how strong, how unchanging! It will not wear out. It is the same armour the people of God have been wearing ever since Adam fell. The Christian soldier must wear it. There are all these other things, but this is vital: "Having on the breastplate" – and there is only one breastplate; there is not any other. Others are weak; they will bend; they will fail; they will break. "Having on the breastplate of righteousness." In that lovely, very long hymn of Joseph Hart on the Christian warfare and the Christian's armour, he puts a vital point:

"Righteousness within thee rooted
May appear to take thy part;
But let righteousness imputed
Be the breastplate of thy heart."

In my early days spiritually, I was well versed in that because Mr. F.L. Rowell seemed to quote it almost every time he preached, whatever the text.

“Righteousness within thee rooted
May appear to take thy part;
But let righteousness imputed
Be the breastplate of thy heart.”

You say, Whatever does that mean? Well, it means this: there must be a work of grace within your heart; there must be that righteous work of the Holy Spirit within your heart, but that must not be the ground of your trust; that must not be the ground of your confidence. The ground of your trust, the ground of your confidence must be something outside yourself. You must have that work in you, but you must not rest on it; you must rest on the righteousness of Christ. So, “Righteousness within thee rooted,” the righteousness of the Holy Spirit, it may not “appear to take thy part,” but it does. But O,

“Let righteousness imputed
Be the breastplate of thy heart.”

Beloved friends, have you a sweet hope that you are wearing the breastplate of Christ’s righteousness this evening?

“Having on the breastplate of righteousness.” Well, just a few things. There is going to be a conflict. It is not going to be an easy way to heaven. When I was a boy, the old preachers used to say so often, “You are not going to walk to heaven in carpet slippers.” And the hymnwriter says, “Believers are not called upon to sleep or play, but fight.” Now you and I are weak, very weak. You and I are helpless, very helpless. Satan is very strong, very cruel, and he has been studying ever since Adam fell how to overthrow sinners, how to overthrow God’s people. He will constantly assail you, and he is a treacherous foe. In the ancient warfare of the Middle Ages, it was often by treachery that the enemy triumphed. If there is something you do not like, Satan will not tempt you to do it, but he knows where you are weak and he will tempt you there. He is not your only enemy. There is the world which lieth in wickedness. You are not a friend of the world, are you? “Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” I hope we have not any enemies of God in Bethel chapel tonight, but if you are a friend of the world, you are an enemy of God. And the world will oppose you, or the world will allure you, entice you. One of your worst enemies is yourself. We have a sinful self which goes along with the world, goes along with Satan. The old divines used to speak of the three-fold foe, the world, the flesh and the

devil. They are all too much for us. And then the Word of God says, “The last enemy,” and that is the greatest, that is death. “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” So death is an enemy and it is the last enemy, but with the people of God it shall be destroyed.

So there is going to be this conflict, even when you are sitting in chapel, wrong thoughts, and carried away. You may find that you are tempted with awful thoughts even about the Saviour. You may be tempted on the truth. That may frighten you. When I was a boy and went to chapel, I had not the slightest doubt concerning all the doctrines of free and sovereign grace. But as soon as the Lord began to deal with me, I wondered if that one was right and wondered if that was right. I wondered if the Arminians were right and wondered if we were wrong. If you have two cats together in a room it is quite peaceful, or it should be. But if one of those cats is taken away and you put a dog in, you are going to have a fight straightaway. By nature there is no conflict because we are in league with Satan, though we do not know it. But when the new birth takes place, there is a new nature, the power of grace. Then there is the struggle. But, “Has He not His promise passed, that thou shalt overcome at last?” The conflict.

But this is the great point: “Having on the breastplate of righteousnesses.” And if you and I are sheltering in Christ’s righteousness, if you and I are trusting in Christ’s righteousness, we are safe and Satan cannot prevail. But so often our eyes are turned away from Christ, our eyes look a different way. We almost go back to Sinai. We are on weak ground. “To keep our eyes on Jesus fixed,” and on His glorious righteousness – let that alone be your breastplate. “To keep our eyes on Jesus fixed, and there our hope to stay.” All God’s people will be victorious. There will be the fight, the conflict, but all God’s people will be victorious. It does not matter how weak, how helpless they are, how unworthy, if they are clothed in good armour. It did not matter how weak that poor soldier was if he had this good, strong breastplate. The enemy could not assail him there, the enemy could not destroy him, the enemy could not even wound him there.

So you see the point: you and I weak, helpless; our enemies, our foes strong. The conflict to our dying day, but victory sure, victory certain. These are they that overcome, every one of them.

“I ask them whence their victory came,
They with united breath,
Ascribe their conquest to the Lamb,
Their triumph to His death.”

But every one victorious, on one ground: because in the conflict, of vital necessity they had to wear this glorious, impenetrable breastplate, Christ's righteousness, which is “unto all and upon all them that believe.” “For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous.” And that righteousness of Christ can never be destroyed; that righteousness of Christ must avail; that righteousness of Christ must land His beloved people save in heaven, however severe the conflict.

“Having on the breastplate of righteousness.”