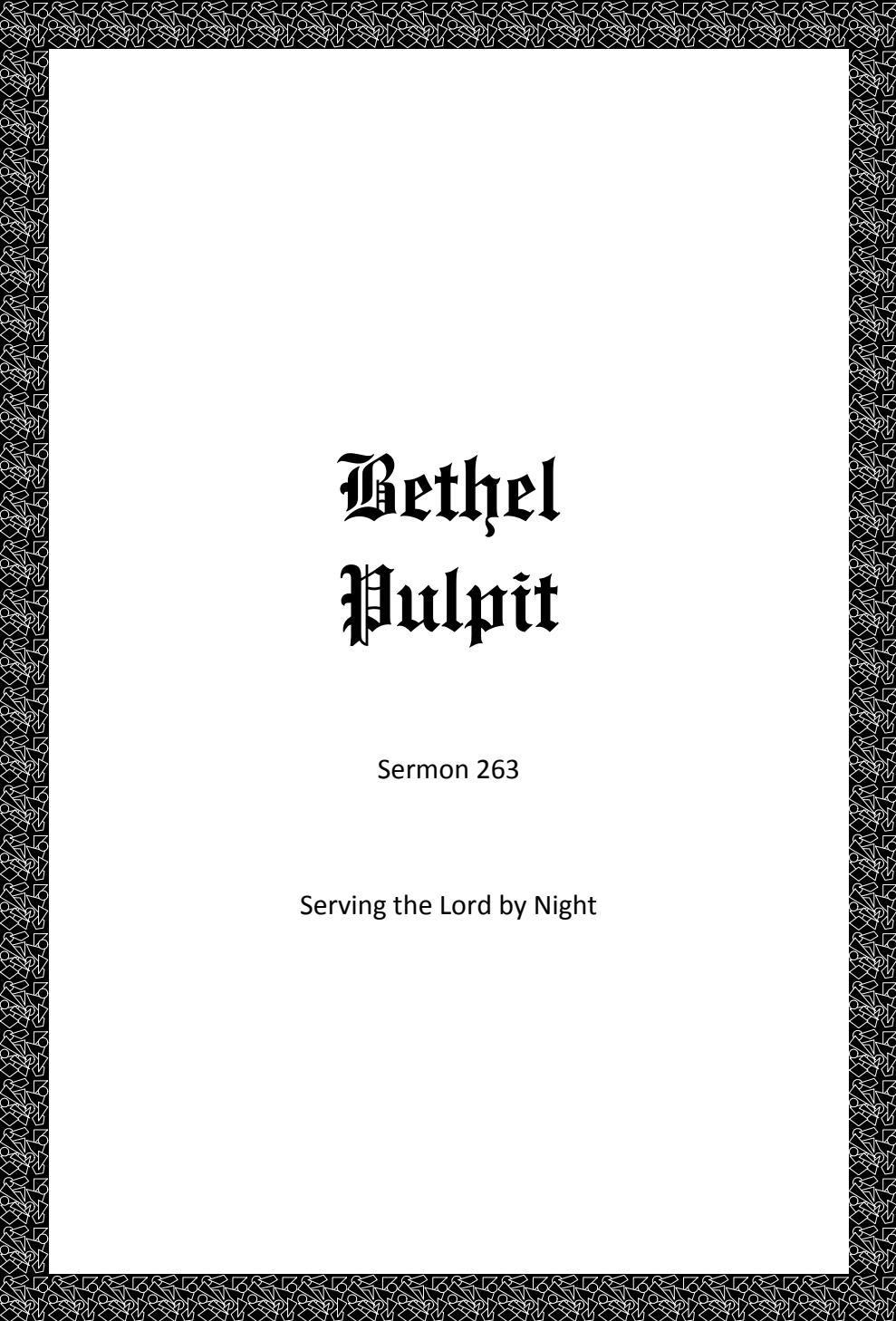




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 263

Serving the Lord by Night

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 3rd June, 2007**

Text: *“Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord” (Psalm 134. 1).*

This very short psalm is one of the “songs of degrees” – in fact, the last of the “songs of degrees.” As I have often reminded you, these were the psalms that were sung by the pilgrims as three times a year they journeyed to Jerusalem with holy expectation, with holy longing. “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.”

If this psalm was sung as the pilgrims were arriving in Jerusalem very early, it seems that with holy delight they saw the lights in the windows of the temple, and they were reminded that the service of God was uninterrupted, that there was no interval in it, that it continued day and night. Some people have thought that perhaps this last of the songs of degrees was a farewell as early in the morning they were leaving Jerusalem, their last sight of Jerusalem. It was still night, it was still dark, but the lights were still on in the temple, and as they left, it was with sadness at leaving the house of God, and it was with a holy regard and love for the services of the Lord's house. I wonder how many of you here this morning can say that: “Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thine honour dwelleth.”

“Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” Let me come straight away to the point: how this verse came to me and how it rests with me. When I was trying to speak to you on Thursday evening from, “Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure,” I was speaking at some length on the darkness of the day in which we live both in the church of God and in the country, yet even then, even amidst all this darkness, “Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure.” I do not think I actually mentioned this particular verse, but it did seem to arrest me whilst I was speaking: “Ye servants of the Lord, which *by night* stand in the house of the Lord.” In other words, that God in His sovereignty has appointed that your life and my life is to be lived during a night-time in the nation and a night-time in

the church of God. But God does not make any mistakes. We sang it in our opening hymn:

“Sovereign Ruler of the skies,
Ever gracious, ever wise;
All my times are in Thy hand,
All events at Thy command” –

these various disposals of divine providence.

We often quote that word: “My times are in Thy hand.” But we often forget this point, that the day on which we were born is fixed and so is the day on which we shall die, and our time longer or shorter in this earth is fixed. Some of you might have felt you would have liked to live when the Lord Jesus was here on earth. Some of God’s people had their little lives fixed then. You might have thought it would be wonderful during that glorious Evangelical Revival when thousands were flocking to hear the truth, or you might have thought of various times, but the Lord has not seen fit in His sovereignty that you and I should live at any other time. He has fixed our little lives *now*, and it is night-time in the church of God and night-time in the country, and we are called in our own day and generation to serve the Lord. “Ye servants of the Lord, which *by night* stand in the house of the Lord.” And the command to each of us is, “Occupy till I come.”

So a few things on the night-time; a few things on serving the Lord; a few things especially on serving the Lord when it is night-time; and a few things about blessing the Lord: “Bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” It is not very often that I speak of national conditions and church conditions. I think it is easy to be swallowed up with them, and we must ever remember that “one thing is needful,” whether the days are bright or dark, whether it is day or night, and the vital thing is a personal, saving knowledge of the Son of God, an interest in His precious blood. Yet it is not right, it is wrong for us to ignore, turn a blind eye to conditions in the church of God and in our nation.

Now it is night-time, night-time in the church of God. You know what the old, godly divines used to say the three marks of night-time are: the shadows have fallen, the labourers have gone home to their rest, and the beasts have come out of their dens. Now what a description of night-

time at present in the church of God! The shadows *have* fallen. It is darkness and not light. We do not see many people called by God's grace. We do not see many making an open profession of the Lord's name. We do not find many walking in the tender fear of God. The shadows have fallen.

Most certainly the labourers have gone home to their rest. That is the point that is exceedingly solemn. I picked up the list of our ministers when I first went out to preach, and there were many of them – godly, gracious, well-taught, able, faithful ministers of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And one by one the labourers have been taken to their rest and there are few to take their place. And do not forget, there is a commandment to the church of God: “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth labourers into His harvest.” But the Lord Jesus did not say preachers; *labourers*. There is a difference. “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth *labourers* into His harvest.”

Then the wild beasts of the forest have crept forth – the insinuations of Satan, the encroachment of the world, the prevalence of so many ungodly things, the errors that begin to spread. If you take religion generally, you see appalling error and the sanctioning of evil, and if you come to our own churches, error has appeared and there are those who go with it. So it is night-time in the church of God.

You do not need me to spend long in speaking on the dark night in the nation – the lawlessness, the violence, the abortions, the homosexuality, the Sabbath-breaking, the getting rid of good laws, the bringing in of evil laws. It is night-time in the nation and it is night-time in the church of God, and as things seem at present, the night grows darker. “The burden of Dumah,” says the prophet. “He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will inquire, inquire ye: return, come.” Now may that solemn word of the watchman have a place in our hearts. But I do not want to linger long on this dark night, but it is not right for us to be blind to it, to ignore it. We do need to be reminded of the evil of the time in which we live and the sadness.

“Ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” Perhaps some of you sometimes do wish that you had lived in a different day. Perhaps some of you think the time of the Reformation

would have been a wonderful time. Perhaps some of you think the days of the Puritans would have been a wonderful time. I would just remind you of one thing: that in those days of wonderful, spiritual prosperity when thousands flocked to hear the truth and thousands were blessed, there was much dreadful poverty; there was much awful injustice in the land; there was much terrible suffering. Conditions were not good. Often the godly went home from the house of God with nothing to eat in the middle of the Sabbath day. And also so often those times were times of dreadful persecution for the people of God.

So we have that word in Ecclesiastes: “Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.” What is the wise man saying? Is he saying the former days were not better? I think he is reminding us that the godly had a lot to suffer. There was a lot of poverty and need. But the wise man does *not* say that the former days were *not* better than these in the church of God; they were. He says, Say not why; you should know why. “Thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.” I think most of you know why the former days were better than these: because the world is so much with us now. We are so much taken up with the world, even lawful things in the world. Some of those old, godly people had no interest whatsoever in life except the things of God, the house of God, the Word of God.

“Ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” Well, the Lord has appointed that your life and mine has not been lived in a day of wonderful spiritual prosperity or a wonderful day even in our country, but in a time of darkness, in a time of night. But God did not make any mistake when He appointed the day you were born, the time when you were going to live. We think of our babies born into this dark, dark, dark world.¹ Well, the Lord is able to watch over them. The Lord is able to keep them. And if they are under the shadow of the Almighty, they will be just as safe, just as secure in this terrible day in which we live as in the most blessed age that ever there was. “God is the same to endless years,” and if He has placed our lot in this dark night-time, He knows, and He understands, and He cares, and His eye is upon us, and the darkness and the light are both the same to Him. He can bless His Word just as much now as He did in Reformation times, Puritan times. “The Word of God is not bound.”

¹ Two newborn babies were brought to chapel for the first time that day.

The sad, awful thing seems to be that there is a withdrawing from the earth of what our friends the godly Scots call *common grace*. Now I do not like the expression, but I believe the doctrine – that in all ages the Lord has put a spirit of restraint upon this world that He made. Thus far shalt thou go, and no further. He has put a restraint, and that is the general mercy and general goodness of God. Let us be clear, beloved friends, if God down the ages had not put this outward restraint on this world, it would not be fit to live in; it would be just like hell itself. But God in His general goodness to His creation which He has not yet forsaken, and also for the sake of His elect and especially for the sake of His beloved Son, has placed this kind of restraint. But the solemn point is in the last days this restraint, or what some people call *common grace*, is gradually being taken away, and that is why this day is such a solemn time.

We think of our young people, our girls and boys growing up in this world, in this time of darkness. Now God has not changed, and that is a wonderful truth. “God is able to make *all grace* abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.” God is able to keep His people as much in days of darkness as in days of light, in days of adversity as in days of prosperity. So you girls and boys, especially those of you who know and love and fear the Lord, who are seeking to follow after Him, it is going to be a difficult day in which you live, but God has promised that He will never send a temptation without a way of escape, and if the Lord causes you to walk in a darker day than we in our early days had to walk, then He is able to bless you with more light, shed more light in your hearts than any of us ever knew.

I think there are no darker chapters in all Scripture than the last two chapters in the Old Testament, Malachi chapters 3 and 4. It just seems awful gloom and darkness. “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name.” Well, it is a night of darkness as in the days of Malachi, and surely, surely there are a few of you here, you younger ones, who if you dare not claim more, you fear the Lord and you think upon His name. You cannot deny it. Do you know there is a book of remembrance in heaven? God has a book of remembrance. Of course, it is figurative language. Almighty God does not need a book of ink or paper. It means this: that He never forgets you, that He remembers you, that His

eye is upon you. “A book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name.”

Now then, what comes next? “And they shall be Mine.” There is not a more lovely word in the Old Testament. Do not forget this is that night of terrible darkness, but there are those who are seeking to serve the Lord in that night of darkness. “And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts.” That means Satan will not get them, or the world, not a single one of them, not the weakest of them. “They shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels.” I take it that by His *jewels*, Almighty God means something that is exceedingly precious to Him. You young ones who are following on to know the Lord in this terrible, dark night-time in which we live, and you do not know what you might come across as the days grow worse, there is a loving eye that never sleeps day nor night, and that loving eye is ever upon you to keep you, to remember you. You are in the Lord’s book of remembrance, and He says, “You shall be Mine” – *Mine*. “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.”

“In that day when I make up My jewels.” I do not know much about precious jewels, but I think if people own them, they are very careful with them. They keep them under lock and key. They do not want a thief to take them. They do not want anyone to walk off with them. The crown jewels, it is almost impossible to get anywhere near them. “They shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels.” There will not be a single one missing.

So there is a solemn warning. There is the gloom and there is the darkness, but God is the same and, “His purposes shall ripen fast,” whether it is dark or light, day or night. “His purposes shall ripen fast,” however dark, however gloomy the night.

“His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.”

O that night-time, that dark night-time, the closing chapters of the Old Testament, the last two chapters in Malachi! But do you know how the Old Testament ends? It does not end with a word of gloom or darkness or night. It ends with the Sun shining. O these poor people, this little

remnant who were seeking to serve the Lord, even though it were night-time; God has not forgotten them. “Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings.” It may be that some of you will come across a darker night than we have ever known, but you may have more light and more grace and more love and more blessedness than any of us have ever known, because God is not unmindful of His own. God has not forgotten them. “God is the same to endless years,” and whether it is a day of darkness or a day of light, whether it is night or whether it is day, God’s people are still as dear, still as precious to Him.

Well, the simple point here is this: literally when it was night-time in the temple, the services of the Lord had not to cease. The altar lamps had still to be kept burning. The precious things had still to be guarded. There must be the priests, there must be the Levites there serving the Lord day and night. So this exhortation: “By night.” God’s people are still called to serve Him. “Ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” Now, of course, perhaps you could say that this is first of all a word to ministers of the everlasting gospel. “Ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” Well, if it is specially to the ministers of the gospel, then one thing, they are told to *stand*. “And having done all, to stand.” That means there will be certain things to stand *against*, and that means there will be certain things to stand *for*. It means there are certain people they will have to stand against. But these old priests and Levites had to stand through the night. I have reminded you, there was not any chair for them. They had to stand. They had not to slumber. They had not to fall asleep. “Be vigilant,” the Lord says in one place. So this call to the gospel ministers in this present, dark, evil day: Stand by night in the house of the Lord.

But we are not going to limit this word just to gospel ministers. In our chapel vocabulary we tend to talk, we tend to say that a man is a servant of the Lord, and what do we mean? We mean he is a preacher. But if you read the Word of God carefully, the Old Testament and the New, you will find that all God’s people, all of them are spoken of as servants of the Lord, servants of the most high God. As Montgomery puts it, “Ye servants of the Lord, each in his office wait.” If your religion is real, you are called to serve the Lord. Why, as Scripture comes towards its end, we have a description of them as they are landed safe in heaven. “His servants shall serve Him: and they shall see His face” – now by faith, and then in heaven without a veil between. “And His name shall be in their

foreheads.” Now if you are one of these servants of the Lord – and I take it it embraces the whole of God’s eternally-loved people in all ages, every single one from Adam to the end of time – but if you are one of them, the Lord’s name will be written on your forehead. If you have not got the name of Jesus written on your heart this morning, I do not give much to your religion. There may be many other things you do not have.

“O may Thy name upon my heart
Shed a rich fragrance there.”

I feel sometimes that in the beginning of a work of grace things are so indistinct, things are so cloudy, things are so shadowy, but sometimes the name of Jesus is mentioned and somehow that seems to touch the heart. You can really say, “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds!” Well, “His servants shall serve Him: and they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads.” You know what that means. If you came into chapel this morning and you had a cut on the palm of your hand, or the underside of your foot, or on your back, nobody would see it, but if it was on your forehead it would be very difficult not to disclose it. If you are a servant of the Lord, you cannot hide your religion. It will come out. People will notice it. It is a solemn thing if people do not notice any difference between you and the world, and I do not mean just that on the Sunday morning you are not at home; you are at chapel. I mean the way you speak, the way you behave. O what a godly witness some of the old people in our chapels used to have! Sometimes in the big cities they were known, but especially in the small towns and villages, our chapel people were marked men, marked women, marked girls, marked boys, and the simple, humble life of some poor man, O what a witness it had in those towns and in those villages!

Now, “His servants shall serve Him.” So it is night-time, but God’s people are called to serve Him. In a sense, though it is a strange sense, a solemn sense, the Lord has given His people a special privilege that He has accounted them worthy to be called to serve Him in the darkest night-time. It would be more easy in a different time. It is a harder time, this dark night-time. If the Lord has chosen us to serve Him by night, may we see it as a privilege. Some of the old preachers used to say, Have you noticed that the stars shine brighter when the night is very dark? I believe often it is in these nights of darkness that the lives of God’s people are more to the praise and honour and glory of His name.

“Ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” Well then, what is this serving the Lord? Well, we have it so often: “Serve the Lord with fear.” Walk before Him in obedience to His Word. Look to Him, depend upon Him, separate from the world and all that dishonours Him. Seek His honour and glory. Be constant at the throne of grace. Pray for that soft, that “tender heart, that trembles at the approach of sin.” And seek grace to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.” So it will be your privilege to serve your Lord and God and Saviour before this dark and evil generation. “Ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.”

And do not forget, they are commanded to bless the Lord even in the dark night. Paul and Silas literally did it; at midnight they sang praises to God. I do feel one thing we should speak carefully about. *It is* a dark day; *it is* an evil day, but we should be grateful for the medical care and the increased comforts we have over our godly forefathers. We should not forget that. And we should bless the Lord, even in the darkest night, for His unchanging love, His unchanging mercy, His unchanging grace. And especially this:

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

“Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.” Well, how are we going to serve Him? How are we going to stand? Perhaps there is one scripture answers it: “He giveth more grace.” We like it; we want it; we need it; we pray for it; we seek it; we cannot do without it; we depend on it; and the Lord gives it. He has promised to give it. He will never fail to give it. It is only as the Lord gives us more grace that we shall ever be able to serve Him in this dark night, that we shall ever be able to stand in this dark night, till the day dawns and the shadows flee away and there is the ushering in of that eternal day and that place where there is no night and there is no need for the sun, for the Lamb is the glory of that place where “glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel’s land.”