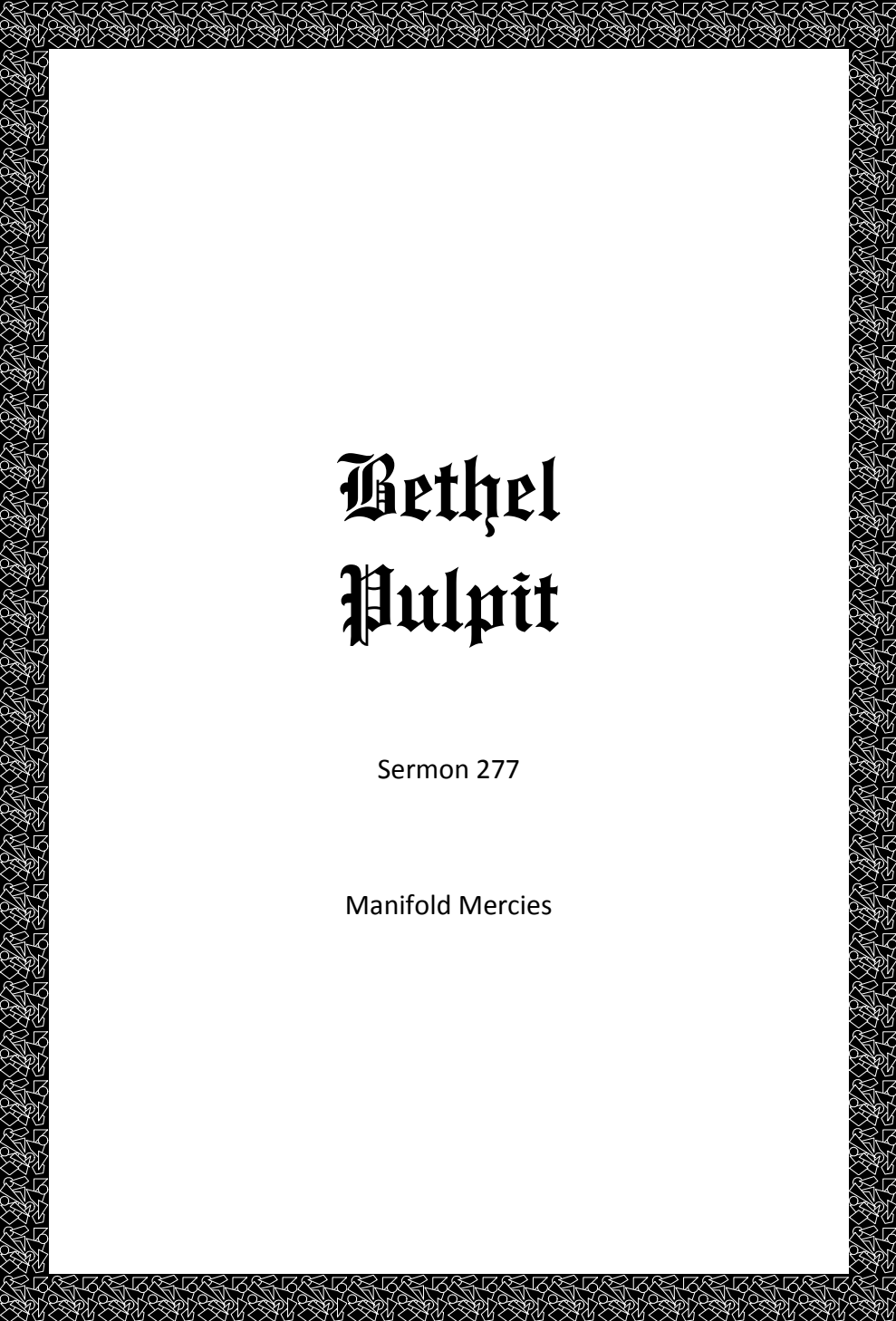




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 277

Manifold Mercies

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 3rd July, 2008**

Text: “*Yet Thou in Thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness*” (Nehemiah 9. 19).

Two things right at the beginning strike us as unusual. The first is this: that the language of this text should be found in the Book of Nehemiah. You would think it almost belongs to the Psalms or Isaiah or something like that, but it is in the Book of Nehemiah. When we think of the Book of Nehemiah, it is concerned with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. That is the great subject of this Book; that is the wonderful thing for which Nehemiah is remembered. Yet we have to come to this: that Nehemiah’s great concern was not just the rebuilding of Jerusalem, its gates and its walls, but it was the spiritual prosperity of the people of Jerusalem. That is why you have this verse, this subject, in the Book of Nehemiah.

And the second thing which strikes us as somewhat unusual: these words I have read to you, and the whole of this long chapter, are part of a prayer, a prayer to the Most High God, yet verse after verse it is rehearsing the history of God’s ancient people. But it is spoken to the Most High God; it is spoken in prayer. Surely the Lord knew all these things! Surely the Lord did not need to be told them! I take it the point is that God’s people mention all these things, the Lord’s gracious dealings with Israel in days past for this reason: what He was then, surely He will be now, and also to remind themselves in prayer that the God to whom they pray is a faithful and unchanging God. If you will,

“Thou hast helped in every need;
This emboldens me to plead;
After so much mercy past,
Canst Thou let me sink at last?”

So just these brief comments right at the beginning, because as I contemplated this chapter, those two things at first struck me as being rather unusual.

Well, what a theme here: “*Manifold mercies.*” I take this word *manifold* to mean many, a great multitude, but also, of various kinds, of different sorts. “Manifold mercies.” It is a theme which should rejoice the

heart of every longing, needy soul, because what can we do without mercy? And this is the ground and foundation of our hope: mercy. What could we do if the mercies of God were scant and few and easily taken away? “Manifold mercies.” In the Word of God, in one place we read of manifold transgressions; in another place, manifold temptations; we know we have manifold infirmities. But this is the answer to them all: “manifold mercies.”

So what a theme here, the mercies of God to His people in Christ! You can think of that mercy in the plan of salvation. You can think of that mercy in the purposes of God. “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.” You can think of the mercy of the Lord Jesus in coming, His mercy in His life, death, resurrection, ascension, exaltation. You can think of the merciful words He spoke, the merciful deeds He performed, and then you can think of all the mercies there are in the gospel: forgiveness, pardon, acceptance in the Beloved, cleansing in the blood of Christ, an interest in His righteousness, the privilege of prayer. And there are the mercies displayed by the Holy Ghost as He makes salvation known. And then there are mercies in providence, mercies in our lives day by day, “mercies countless as the sands which daily we receive.” “Manifold mercies.” Without them we must perish; without them we must be lost. There is such a suitability in the mercy of God. But it is the plenteousness of God’s mercy in Christ to unworthy sinners and it is the abundance of these mercies. It is a beautiful expression, isn’t it? It is inexhaustible. If only we could be led into it!

“Manifold mercies.” Yet here the Lord’s people are looking back. They are remembering the mercies of God to Israel right from the first day even until now. They are looking back with thanksgiving and gratitude and with amazement at the mercies of God, the way He has dealt with them, borne with them, spared them, despite their rebellion, backsliding and sin. “Manifold mercies” – looking back, remembering. Now may you and I this evening know something of that: looking back over our lives, where we were by nature.

“When I was to Thee a stranger,
Wandering in forbidden ways,
From the paths of sin and danger
Thou didst call me by Thy grace.”

Why me, Lord?

“Manifold mercies.” And then those mercies that have kept us to this day and will not let us go. O may it be a time of looking back as it was with Israel here, remembering what the Lord has done despite our unworthiness and sin, that help in the trying hour, that wonderful deliverance, that gracious upholding.

“Manifold mercies.” Now beloved friends, there are a few things here that God’s ancient people dwell on as they ponder the Lord’s mercies to His people, especially in bringing them out of Egypt and being with them in the wilderness and bringing them into the Promised Land. There are these special mercies they seem to dwell upon and ponder, and really in a spiritual sense you and I have these same amazing mercies to ponder and to think about. “Thou in Thy manifold mercies forsookest them not.” So briefly let me just name them, remind you of some of these wonderful mercies the Lord displayed to His people in the wilderness. They remind Almighty God of them; they set them forth simply and clearly here. And if you and I belong to the spiritual Israel, these mercies are ours day by day.

The first of these manifold mercies they dwell on is *the presence of the Lord*. That is a wonderful mercy. It was to Israel in the wilderness – the Lord’s gracious presence with them, leading them along, bringing them safely through. It was symbolised by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, that the Lord was there in the midst, His gracious presence ever with them despite their faults and failures and sins, never leaving them, never forsaking them. “Manifold mercies.” O what a mercy this is: the Lord’s gracious presence with His people made known in a special way in the sanctuary, in the house of God, and also made known in a special way to His beloved people when they come to the hour of trial and temptation and sorrow and grief, at all times and in all places. The promise made to Jacob at Bethel belonged to the ancient people Israel, the sons of Jacob, and it belongs to the true Israel today. “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in *all places* whither thou goest.” Now there is manifold mercy there. “All places” – whatever they are.

When the Lord first dealt with us, we did not know some of these places we would have to come into – strange places, unusual places, sad places – but the Lord knew, and “He engaged to manage all, by the way and to the end.” “I am with thee ... in *all places* whither thou goest.” You may feel to be in a strange place tonight. “In all places.” You might come

into a strange place tomorrow. “In all places.” O the wonderful assurance of the Lord’s gracious presence! That was what Moses valued above everything else: “If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence.” And you feel like that, don’t you? If you have the Lord with you, you can venture into this trial, into the unknown way, taking up your cross, following the Lord. “If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence.” But, “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” “Manifold mercies” – the sweet assurance of the Lord’s gracious presence with His people.

“Manifold mercies.” Now the next thing that God’s ancient people specially dwell on here is this: *the Lord’s protection*. Again the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire was a symbol of this, that the Lord was with them to protect them. They were in the wilderness; there were many dangers. You and I are in the wilderness of this world, and surely some of you painfully feel what a waste-howling wilderness it is, but the sweet assurance of divine protection, almighty protection, the Lord round about His people.

“A sovereign Protector I have,
Unseen, yet for ever at hand.”

O what a mercy to have the Lord as our Defender and our Protector!

“Manifold mercies.” Another of these mercies that God’s ancient people dwell so much on is *the Lord’s gracious leading*. “The pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to *lead* them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to shew them light, and the way wherein they should go.” That is a wonderful mercy, to be divinely led in providence. “To shew them ... the way wherein they should go.” “In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths.” Don’t we need the Lord in so many things day by day in our homes and families and lives and circumstances to show us the way wherein we should go! But especially this: “To lead them in the way” – the way to heaven, the way everlasting, the way of salvation, the way in which all God’s people walk. “He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.” Now this is a wonderful mercy. We do need to be divinely led. How the psalmist prayed for it so much: “Lead me in Thy truth, and teach me: for Thou art the God of my salvation.” “Shew me Thy ways, O Lord; teach me Thy paths” – to be divinely led. That has been a good word to some of you: “When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher

than I.” You say, Well, we know there is a Rock. But you cannot always find your way there, can you? – darkness, unbelief. “Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.”

O these manifold mercies of which God’s ancient people reminded the Lord, these mercies He has shown them! Another one is this: *the supply of all their needs*. It keeps coming in: “Thou ... gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and promisedst them that they should go in to possess the land which Thou hadst sworn to give them.” A great people in a waste-howling wilderness, not a particle of food and not a drop of water, but forty years, every need richly supplied. Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide. Have you ever felt that: “My *every* need He richly will supply”? Have you ever felt it like this? I have sometimes in my life. I have been in a strait, a problem a difficulty. There is something and I felt it was not just something I would like or something I wanted; it was something I *really* needed, and humbly I could remind the Lord, if I am mistaken, show me, but I believe I really need it, and Thou hast promised to supply every need. “My every need He richly will supply.”

It was an amazing thing. They lacked nothing all those forty years in the wilderness. And remember what the Lord Jesus said to His disciples: “Lacked ye any thing? and they said, Nothing.” But in the New Testament it is this: “My God shall supply *all your need* according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Here you are tonight in all your emptiness and your felt need, spiritual and perhaps providential, and then to see that wonderful fulness of grace and love and mercy that dwells in the Saviour and the promise that you will receive from it and “grace for grace.” Do not forget, it is *when you come there*. O that little clause of the hymn, what a help it has been: “*When I come there*, I can’t be confounded, The Lord will appear.” “When I come there.” They had not got the manna the day before. “When I come there.” O this wonderful promise that the Lord will supply all His people’s needs!

“Manifold mercies.” There are so many things. Let me just mention one more of them, and that is *the overthrow, the defeat of their enemies*. Some of them are mentioned: the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites and the Girgashites. “Thou gavest them kingdoms and nations, and didst divide them into corners: so they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the

land of Og king of Bashan.” They had some terrible enemies, but the Lord overthrew them. You think of those Egyptians. “I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil.... They sank as lead in the mighty waters.” You think of the Amalekites and how Moses lifted up his hands, and when his hands were lifted up, Israel prevailed. I know we read some strange things about Og, King of Bashan. We are told about this iron bedstead he had, and if you work out the measurements, it must have stretched about halfway across the chapel. Surely he was like Goliath; he was an impossible foe. But the Lord was with them to deliver them from every enemy, every foe. And what have you got – Satan, sin, the world, temptation, unbelief – what have you got? But that sweet assurance:

“And has He not His promise passed,
That thou shalt overcome at last?”

They are brought safely into the promised land. O it is a wonderful thing, it is manifold mercy, to be brought safely into the promised land!

“May I but safely reach my home,
My God, my Heaven, my All.”

So you see one by one these manifold mercies of God to His ancient people are opened up, and the same manifold mercies to His people today.

But then to pass on, beloved friends. There is one special point made here, and the special point really is this: the dreadful sinfulness of God’s ancient people, their backsliding, their rebellion, their disobedience, so that they deserved to be cut off and they deserved to be cast away for ever. They deserved that the Lord would forsake them. Just before this verse we have a most vile act of rebellion against God: “Yea, when they had made them a molten calf, and said, This is thy God that brought thee up out of Egypt, and had wrought great provocations.” It was blasphemy in the extreme. It was almost atheism. It is almost mild language here: “great provocations.” You see the sinfulness, the wickedness, the rebellion, the disobedience of God’s ancient people, and that is the dark, black background to this verse I have read to you.

“Yet Thou in Thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness.” Despite what they had been, despite the greatness of their sin, despite the enormity of their guilt, “yet Thou in Thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness: the pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by

night, to shew them light, and the way wherein they should go. Thou gavest also Thy good spirit to instruct them, and withheldest not Thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst.” You think of it, these dreadful acts of rebellion. In this chapter quite a few of them are mentioned, and the very next morning when they woke up, the manna was still there from heaven and the water was still flowing from the smitten rock and the pillar of cloud was above their heads, the token that the Lord in love and mercy was still with them. It is no wonder that they said, “Manifold mercies.” What can we say to this? “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” It is one of those wonderful *yets* of lovingkindness and tender mercy. “*Yet*,” despite all their sin; “*Yet*,” despite all that they deserved; “*Yet* Thou in Thy manifold mercies forsookest them not.”

And as you and I look back tonight, we think of our faults and our failures and our sins and our hardness of heart and our prayerlessness and what we deserve, but there is still this wonderful *yet* in the gospel. “I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” You deserve to be consumed; perhaps you feel you might be consumed. “Not consumed,” because the Lord changes not in His lovingkindness, in the riches of His grace. And this: “manifold mercies” – no change, no variation. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” That is why we are still here tonight. That is why we are still on praying ground. That is why we are not cut off as cumberers of the earth.

“Yet Thou in Thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness.” Well, contemplating God’s manifold mercies, giving thanks for them, looking back in gratitude – but then we are still in the wilderness. We have not yet reached the Promised Land of bliss. We do not know what lies before us. We come into things and in a moment our lives can be changed for ever. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” Not one of us knows what there may be even tomorrow in our lives, or next week or in the unknown way, what there might be in old age. O but do you ever think about this: what if you are left to yourself, your own weakness, your own infirmity, your own sinful nature, to make shipwreck of faith? Our only hope for the unknown way, our only hope for being brought safely through, safely landed is this: “manifold mercies” in Christ.

“Let but Thy own almighty arm
Sustain a feeble worm,
I shall escape, secure from harm
Amid the dreadful storm.

“Be Thou my all-sufficient Friend,
Till all my toils shall cease;
Guard me through life, and let my end
Be everlasting peace.”

“Yet Thou in Thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness.”