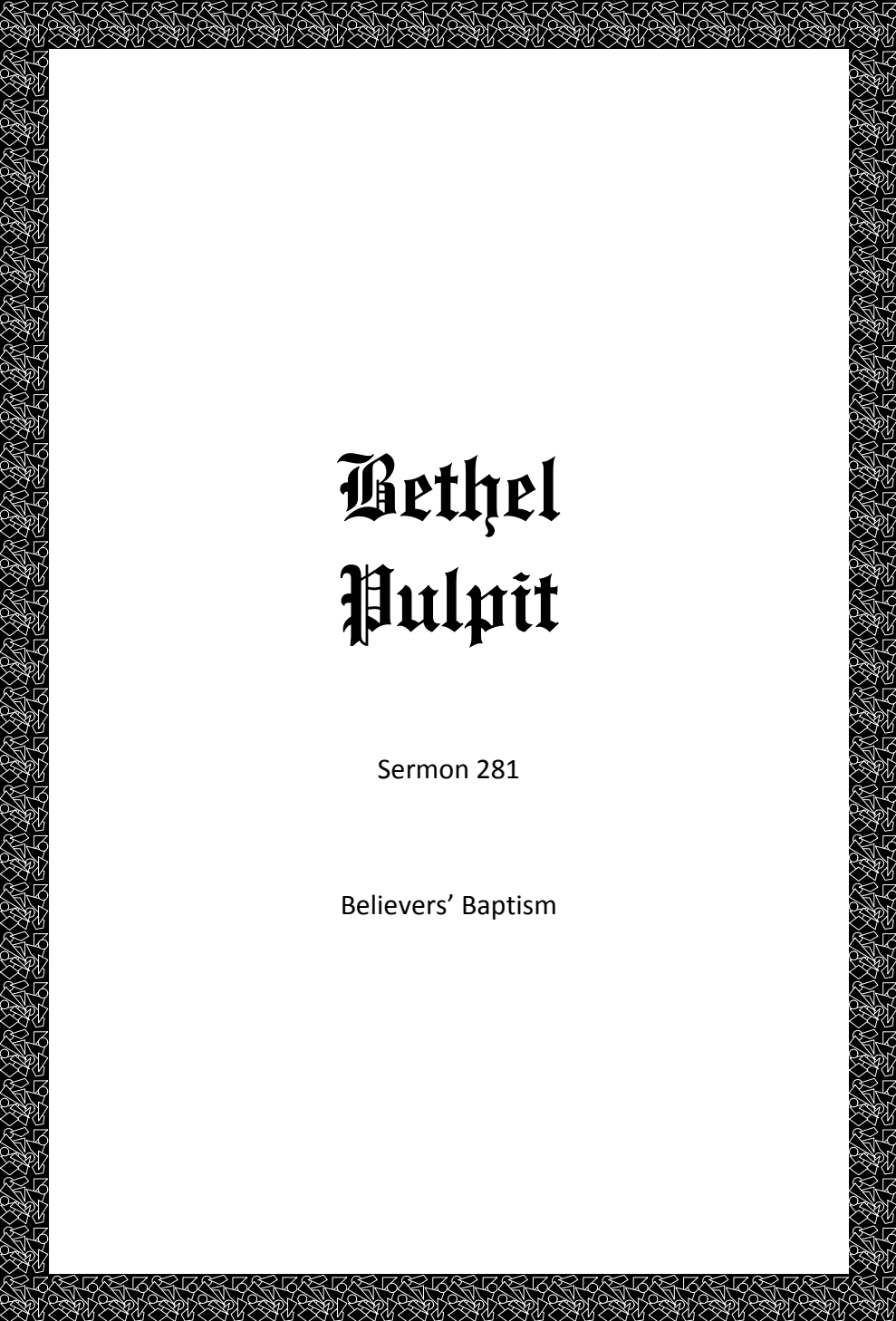




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 281

Believers' Baptism

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 19th October, 2008**

Text: *“And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest”*
(Acts 8. 37).

I hope that each one of us feels the sacredness and the solemnity of the occasion. We are met in the sight of God with reverence and godly fear. And there are two things in our gathering and all that we do this evening. The first is this: we seek the honour and glory of God; and the second, we seek to do *nothing* except what is commanded in God's holy Word and for which we have an example in God's holy Word.

In dealing with this sacred subject of believers' baptism this evening, I would like to go through the events of this wonderful occasion with you, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, and then try to explain what his baptism meant and what baptism means to us this evening, and finally, the qualification, the New Testament qualification: “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest” – a true, saving belief on the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Now we have two people here: Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, completely unknown one to another, never having heard of one another. But it was the purpose of God that they should meet, and it was a strange meeting place, in the middle of a desert. But,

“Yea, God decreed the very place
Where He would show triumphant grace.”

Now look at the mystery of God's sovereignty. Here is Philip. He has gone down to Samaria. He is preaching Christ to them. Many are being blessed. And one day the Lord speaks to him and says, “Go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.” Now the mystery of that commandment! It must have been a solemn shock to Philip. But you see the grace here: “And he arose and went” – the obedience of faith. He did not know why. The Lord did not tell him. It was little by little as Philip ventured, as he obeyed God's voice, that the Lord unfolded His purpose to him.

Now here was this Ethiopian eunuch – do we call him a rich man or do we call him a poor man? – a man of great authority, but he had been

up to Jerusalem to worship and he was returning. You know what that means. He was a sad man; he was a disappointed man; he had an inward burden; he had a hard case. He had travelled all the way from Ethiopia up to Jerusalem hoping to find some help, some comfort, some resting place, and he was returning disappointed; he had not got what he wanted. I believe there are a few of you here this evening who have come to chapel sometimes, and perhaps again and again, and returned and you have been disappointed, and you have not got what you want. "The time of love will come." Philip's God, the eunuch's God, your God is watching over you, and there is going to be that divinely-appointed meeting place just as there was here.

The Lord sent His servant Philip to preach to one man. But Philip did not know why he was going down to the desert. Suddenly in the distance he saw approaching the chariot of some important person, with the great man sitting in the chariot reading something. Actually he was reading what we read tonight, Isaiah 53. Now, "God's providence unfolds the book." "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot." Philip does not know why. He does not know he has to preach a sermon. He has not even got a text. But I like this: "Philip ran thither." That is the willing servant. That is the obedience of faith. "Philip ran thither." He could hear the eunuch reading aloud, and to his amazement, it was Isaiah 53. And Philip said, "Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him."

Now when he got there, the eunuch gave him the text. I have sometimes said that if I were ever thrown unexpectedly into a circumstance like Philip, it would be a pleasure to me if the Lord gave me a text from Isaiah 53. "The place of the Scripture which he read was this" – the sin-atoning sufferings of the dear Lamb of God, the cross of Christ, His death that sinners might live. And the eunuch could not understand it. "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened He not His mouth: in His humiliation His judgment was taken away: and who shall declare His generation? for His life is taken from the earth." Now then, this is the opening: "I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?" He was so ignorant, yet a few minutes later he was rejoicing "with joy unspeakable and full of glory." Sometimes the Lord can make quick work in salvation if it be His holy will.

And then you have this beautiful verse: “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” It must have been a blessed sermon. There was only one in the congregation, unless one or two of the servants were listening. I remember in my early days of preaching I had to go to a chapel in Hebden Bridge to preach one Lord’s day. They told me I would have a congregation of two. It was one of the best Lord’s days I have had. I tried to preach both times: “Jesus only.” I tried to do what Philip did here: he “opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.”

Now we are not told the substance of the sermon, but from what follows and from what the eunuch said, it is very clear to us what Philip preached. He told the eunuch who this Man, this glorious Man was, that His name was Jesus, that He is true, almighty God. He set out to him the way of salvation, the reason why this wonderful Man, though He be the Son of God, should be enduring such ignominy and shame and suffering.

“He took the dying traitor’s place,
And suffered in his stead;
For man (O miracle of grace!)
For man the Saviour bled.”

That must have been the substance of Philip’s sermon, and as he preached it under the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit, he preached it right into the eunuch’s heart. He got all that he never heard at Jerusalem, all that he had sought. He was rejoicing “with joy unspeakable and full of glory.” He found the Pearl of great price. He was satisfied. He had a Saviour. He knew it. He had the blessing of the Lord in his heart. He knew the wonders of this love that was in Philip’s text.

“And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water” – an oasis in the desert. So Philip must have preached baptism to him. “They came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” He had that longing to obey the Lord’s commandment. He had that longing to profess His name, that longing to follow Him in baptism. “And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The eunuch had no trouble with that question. There was not much he knew. He was a new convert; but he knew that Jesus was the Son of God. But he had not heard that up at Jerusalem, you know, or back in Ethiopia. He had now heard it for the first time. It was a miracle. He was reading in a Book about a poor Man,

despised and rejected, crucified, humiliated, and Philip said, This Man is the Son of God, and the eunuch believed it. That is the work of the Holy Ghost. That is true conviction. That is living faith. “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

Which brings me to the eunuch’s baptism. I do want to tread lovingly and carefully here, but if he was only going to be sprinkled with a few drops of water, he must have had plenty for his journey in the chariot, and there was no need for him to wait until they came to a pool in the desert, until they came to an oasis. “See, here is water.” He was waiting till they came to a suitable place. So Philip must have explained to him what baptism is. And how clearly we have it set forth here, that this was baptism by immersion, baptism by dipping. The Holy Ghost has carefully recorded it: “They went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water....” We have the method of New Testament baptism, just as with John, who “was baptizing in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there,” and when the Lord Jesus was baptized in Jordan, and He “went up ... out of the water.”

What is the significance, then, of believers’ baptism by immersion in water? Well, it is a humble profession, an outward profession of the Lord’s name. This open baptistery represents a grave, the grave of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. “Come, see the place where the Lord lay.” It represents a grave. One of our hymns calls it “the liquid grave.” Another calls it “the watery grave.” So what do we do in going into the water? Symbolically, typically, we die and we are buried and we rise again. How the apostles emphasised it! “We are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

So really if this is the grave and it speaks of death and burial and resurrection, what was the eunuch’s profession and what is our profession? Now two things. First of all, that as the Lord Jesus died and was buried and rose again, that is the place where my hope, my only hope rests. I have no other hope; none in self or anything I can do, or in any rite. There is nothing saving in baptism – baptism is not salvation – but it is a profession that my hope, my only hope as a sinner rests upon the death and burial and glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus. So it is an ordinance for sinners, because it is only sinners who can say,

“My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Then secondly, the eunuch’s profession was this: that as we go down into the water and are buried in baptism and come up again from the water, our desire is that we might die to our past life of sin, die to any hope of salvation in the law or anything we can do, die to self, die to our sin, and as a profession of it, to be buried, and then that desire to rise again to newness of life. “That as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

It is a beautiful ordinance, beloved friends. It is full of Christ. They tell me Huntington once had a woman in his congregation who wanted to be baptized, and you know Huntington was not a Baptist, and quite sharply he said, “Woman, what are you going to be baptized for?” She said, “Sir, I can see Christ in the water!” “Go after Him, then,” said Huntington, “Go after Him.”

And then we come to the qualification. “What doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” People argue, even in our own chapels. They say, What must a person have? What must they not have? It is “to the law and to the testimony,” and this is the apostolic qualification for believers’ baptism, this is the New Testament qualification: to be a true believer, a whole-hearted believer in the Son of God. Now that is the qualification. Let us be clear, it does not just mean an empty profession. It does not just mean believing that Jesus lived and died. It does not just mean believing Jesus is the Son of God. It does not even mean just believing that the blood of Jesus cleanseth from all sin. The devils believe that, but they are not qualified to be baptized. The devil is a better theologian than any of us in this chapel, but it will not take him to heaven; it will not save him.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” When a sinner is born again of the Spirit of God, he feels his need of a Saviour, his need to be made right, to be prepared for heaven. He needs to be washed in the blood of Christ. He needs so many things. And feeling his unworthiness, he knows he cannot merit salvation or merit any favour, or do any of these things for himself. And then Christ is made known, Christ the eternal Son of God, who He is, what He has done, an almighty Saviour, and that sinner, led and taught by the Spirit of God, is brought to believe on the Son of God to the everlasting salvation of his soul.

The vital element in this believing is not believing *about* Jesus; it is believing *on* Jesus; it is believing *in* Jesus. The vital element of it is trust, looking to Him alone, resting on Him alone, believing on Him alone as the Rock of eternal ages. Now that is a true believer and that is what living faith is. “If thou believest with all thine heart.” If God has blessed you with living faith, if Christ is your only hope, if you can rightly answer that question, “What think ye of Christ?” and if you can say from an honest heart, “Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on Thee,” however unworthy you are, however great a sinner you are, then, “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.”

“Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
All in all in Thee I find.”

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” I believe there are a lot of dear souls in our chapels and what troubles them is this. They think, How can I go before the Lord’s people [to give a testimony] and rehearse something in order? But if you were to ask them any questions concerning their standing, their hope, their fears, their wishes, their longings, their desires, the ground of their hope, the place where they are looking, the Person they are trusting, they could give you a perfect answer to those questions. It is this: to be brought as an unworthy sinner with nothing in my hands to the foot of the cross, to rest on a once-crucified, now risen, exalted Saviour, and resting on Him, to find peace and joy in believing.

It is a wonderful thing to be a true believer on the Son of God, and as Joseph Hart said, only He who created the world can make a believer. It is a wonderful thing to be a true believer on the Son of God, Christ my only hope, looking to Him alone, hanging on Him alone, depending on Him alone. That is the religion that takes a guilty sinner to heaven, and that is the ground of a sinner’s profession of the name of Jesus.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.”

“Soar we now where Christ has led,
Following our exalted Head;
Made like Him, like Him we rise;
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies!”

* * *

Humble souls, who seek salvation
Through the Lamb's redeeming blood,
Hear the voice of revelation;
Tread the path that Jesus trod.
Flee to Him, your only Saviour;
In His mighty name confide;
In the whole of your behaviour,
Own Him for your Sovereign Guide.

Hear the blest Redeemer call you;
Listen to His gracious voice;
Dread no ills that can befall you,
While you make His ways your choice.
Jesus says, "Let each believer
Be baptizèd in My name."
He Himself, in Jordan's river,
Was immersed beneath the stream.

Plainly here His footsteps tracing,
Follow Him without delay;
Gladly His command embracing;
Lo! your Captain leads the way.
View the rite with understanding;
Jesus' grave before you lies;
Be interred at His commanding;
After His example rise.

J. Fawcett

Jesus, and shall it ever be,
A mortal man ashamed of Thee?
Ashamed of Thee, whom angels praise;
Whose glories shine to endless days?

Ashamed of Jesus! sooner far
Let evening blush to own a star;
He sheds His beams of light divine
O'er this benighted soul of mine.

Ashamed of Jesus! just as soon
Let midnight be ashamed of noon;

'Tis midnight with my soul till He,
Bright Morning Star, bids darkness flee.

Ashamed of Jesus! that dear Friend,
On whom my hopes of heaven depend!
No; when I blush, be this my shame,
That I no more revere His name.

Ashamed of Jesus! yes, I may,
When I've no guilt to wash away;
No tear to wipe; no good to crave;
No fears to quell; no soul to save.

Till then, nor is my boasting vain,
Till then I boast a Saviour slain;
And O may this my glory be,
That Christ is not ashamed of me.

His institutions would I prize;
Take up my cross, the shame despise;
Dare to defend His noble cause,
And yield obedience to His laws.

J. Grigg