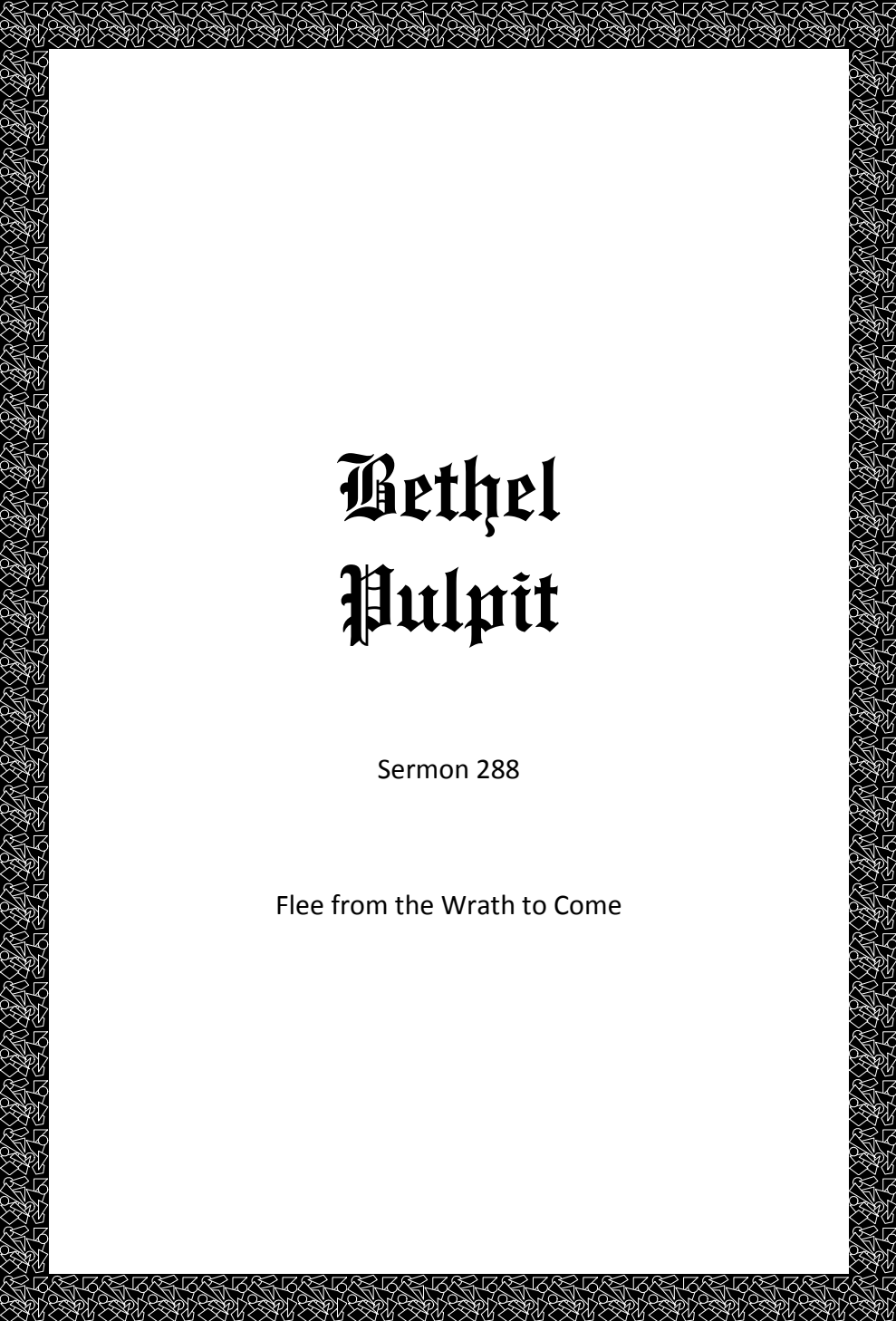




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 288

Flee from the Wrath to Come

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 29th March, 2009**

Text: *"Flee from the wrath to come" (Matthew 3. 7).*

John the Baptist was exercising his wonderful ministry on the banks of the River Jordan, and O what a blessed ministry it was as he warned sinners, as he preached the vital necessity of repentance! "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And how he pointed them to the Saviour! "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." He was blessed with wonderful prosperity, amazing prosperity. Was there ever such a man as John the Baptist? You know what the Lord Jesus said of him: "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist."

You see his greatness in this: that when the Saviour came, the great majority who had been following John left him to follow the Saviour, and people thought John would either be offended, or if not offended, he would be sad. But he said, "This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." Now that is grace! Like those two ministers in Edinburgh in covenanting times; they were going along the street and one was preaching at one church, one at the other. I think one was Andrew Gray and the other was James Durham. As they came to the parting of the ways, they saw a multitude going in one direction and a few in the other. Andrew Gray was so upset for his brother minister. James Durham not only submitted, but expressed his delight that they were going to hear such a minister, and his prayer was that Christ might be glorified and sinners might be blessed.

O for the spirit of John the Baptist! In his life there were some great mysteries. He was thrown into prison, cruelly so, unjustly so, and for the reason that he was faithful to the truth. But as he lay in prison, his faith almost failed. He sent those messengers: "Art Thou He that should come? or look we for another?" That is John the Baptist, who had heard the voice from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"; the one who had the great honour of baptizing the Saviour. "Art Thou He that should come? or look we for another?" "Go your way, and tell John" – tell him again, said the Saviour (Matt. 11. 4). We need to be told again. "Tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame

walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me.”

But then the greatest mystery of divine sovereignty. John was languishing in prison. If ever there was a faithful servant of Christ it was John! Why was he not set free? Why was he not delivered? One day he hears the prison door being opened. Surely this must be it – freedom, deliverance. And he is led away to a martyr’s death, to be cruelly executed. There are some strange mysteries of God’s sovereignty, God’s providence. And then you have that beautiful word: “His disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus.” They came and told Jesus. That is the only way we can go when we have these mysterious providences. They were full of sorrow. They had lost their master. They did not know what to do, where to go now. They could not understand God’s sovereignty. They could not pray to have John the Baptist back. And they buried the body of John, and they “went and told Jesus.” Beloved friends, that is your work of faith this evening, those of you who have strange things in your life that you cannot understand, to go and tell the Saviour.

“He kindly listens while they tell
The bitter pangs they feel within.”

But here John was an immensely-popular man. People were crowding to him. What about this: “Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan”? There was such wonderful popularity. And what always happens in days of tremendous popularity, you find that all kinds of people do not want to be left out. They want to be in it. They want to be part of it. This verse I have read to you this evening is the first time in the Bible we hear of Pharisees and Sadducees. We hear a lot about them later on. This is the first time they are ever mentioned. And John the Baptist said some solemn things to them. He called them a “generation of vipers.” Some of the most solemn things the Lord Jesus ever said, He said to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. John the Baptist saw clearly they had no good intentions. They were only coming either to spy out the land, or to find fault, or to accuse him, or else to be found identifying with all this prosperity, but he knew they had no real desire to “flee from the wrath to come.”

So lingering here a little this evening, because there are plenty of Pharisees and Sadducees about today. There were two or three things for which the Lord Jesus and John the Baptist condemned them so severely. Now it is very clear that many of them were hypocrites, and hypocrisy in the sight of a holy and heart-searching God is a terrible thing. Now beware of hypocrisy. We have all got a bit of it in us. The word *hypocrite* is really a Greek word which means a play-actor. The actor in a play weeps, but he is not really upset; he laughs, but he is not really happy; he says things, but does not really mean them. He is only acting in a play. That is the root meaning of hypocrisy. We have all got something of it in us. The Lord deliver us from it. We want others to think well of us. But beware of hypocrisy deep down in your heart. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked.” So that was one thing for which John the Baptist and later the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ condemned these Pharisees.

Now the second thing was this: they were self-righteous. They were not all hypocrites. Some of them in their own way were good people. They did good, but they were proud of it; they trusted in it. Now there is no salvation for us if we trust in ourselves or in our own righteousness. If we are trusting in our own righteousness, we are as bad as or even worse than those who are openly sinful. You remember how when Whitefield went to Bristol to preach to those thousands in the open air, there were many miners who were so evil, so wicked, they were more like wild beasts than men. And Whitefield said as the Lord opened their hearts they loved the preaching of Christ our righteousness because they had not any of their own to trust in or get rid of. They used to say it was an amazing scene, those hundreds of miners straight from the pit and their black faces with two white furrows where the tears flowed as Whitefield preached. Just pausing here, it almost seems impossible, those thousands perhaps even at four o’clock in the morning should flock outside the town or city to hear a man stand up on a wooden pulpit and multitudes going away blessed, things in England being turned upside down.

But this is why John the Baptist and the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ reproved the Pharisees. They “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” And of course, we have the well-known story of the publican and the Pharisee, how the Pharisee despised the poor publican, and the publican “went down to his house justified rather than the other.” “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

Then there was a third thing, a third reason why John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus spoke so much about the Pharisees. That was, their religion was completely formal. They had a lot of religion. They were very careful. They tithed mint and anise and cummin. But it was completely formal. They omitted the weightier matters of law and judgment. We do need to beware of formality, to come and go to the house of God, to do everything in the right way yet not to know the reality of vital godliness. So John the Baptist said to them, “Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” They were not fleeing from the wrath to come, and they knew it. They were coming out of curiosity, or just wanting to be in the tide of prosperity.

Now I take this to be one of the best-known verses in the Bible: “Flee from the wrath to come.” And it is interesting that when it appears in holy Scripture, it does not appear in a solemn warning like that; it does not appear in a solemn command like that; it does not barely say, “Flee from the wrath to come.” It comes in a different way: “Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” I tried to ponder why this scripture is so well known, and the way we know it is like this: “Flee from the wrath to come.” You know the reason why it is always spoken of in this way, and why we think of it in this way, and why preachers speak of it in this way: because it is the very beginning of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Remember Bunyan’s Christian crying, “What shall I do?” with the burden on his back and wandering about not knowing what to do. He meets Evangelist, and Evangelist hands to him a parchment, a scroll, and on that scroll these few words are written: “Flee from the wrath to come.” It is almost like the text for Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. And the whole of what follows is this: Christian through grace fleeing from the wrath to come.

So this is a very solemn point. Wrath – nowadays perhaps we more would say *anger*. But the wrath of God abideth for ever on the ungodly. God is an angry God. God is angry with sin. God is angry with sinners. God is angry with nations. God is angry with persons. And we read so often of the “day of wrath,” that one day God’s anger will be poured out upon sinners, and all of us are sinners. We are rebels against God. We have disobeyed Him. We have trespassed against His laws. We have failed to honour Him. We are guilty. He is a holy God, a righteous God, a just God. He “will by no means clear the guilty.” He gave us a holy law which we have broken in thought, word and deed, and so the

Word of God describes us as being “by nature the children of wrath.” So the day hastens on when God’s anger, God’s wrath, will be poured out upon the ungodly – the great judgment day. “The great day of His wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” Now will you? Will I?

In the chapels where you are brought up, you tend to have little sayings. I know the little saying I was brought up with at Haslingden – that beautiful hymn, “Bold shall I stand in that great day,” and they used to say, “Will you? Bold, in that great day?” And we are nearer to it than we ever were before. It is our mercy if our eyes have been opened to see our danger, to see that dreadful day that none can escape, if our ears have been opened to hear the Lord’s warnings, and if the Lord has enabled us to “flee from the wrath to come.” That hymn we sang just now was a good commentary on this text. The first few verses, the wrath of God, the wrath to come, sinners under condemnation. And what then?

“Fly, then, awakened sinners, fly;
Your case admits no stay;
The fountain’s opened now for sin;
Come, wash your guilt away.”

“Flee from the wrath to come.” So I read to you that very, very solemn chapter in the Book of Genesis (chapter 19), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now that was the day of God’s wrath, and who could stand? The iniquity of those cities was full, and so they were completely destroyed, but the Lord in mercy sent two angels in answer to Abraham’s prayers to Sodom before they destroyed the city. Really what they said to Lot was this: “Flee from the wrath to come.” Lot believed them, but we have one of the most amazing words in the Old Testament: “He lingered.” You would have thought that if God sent two angels from heaven to tell a man he must hurry out of the city because that night it was going to be destroyed by fire, he would run. But he lingered! Now that is you, that is me by nature. That is the deafness of our ears; that is the blindness of our eyes; that is the hardness of our heart. We hear these warnings and we believe them. Lot believed them, yet he lingered. And you and I linger. O may this be a word to you lingerers here tonight. You know what I mean by *lingerers*. Not those who despise the Word, but those who believe it, who know it is true, who are satisfied it is God’s Word, who have not a doubt that the day of God’s wrath shall come, who know the wicked shall be punished – yet you linger. Now though you

believe it, it is unbelief that makes you linger. There is something in us that will always settle down on our lees, something in us that always says there is plenty of time. Then there is something that says “we cannot do things of ourselves.” And Lot lingered.

And then we have that very beautiful word: “The Lord being merciful unto him.” And what did the Lord do? These two men, these two angels forcefully took hold of Lot and dragged him out of the city. That is divine compulsion, but there was mercy in it. That is what we need and that is what many here need: that divine compulsion, the Lord being merciful to you.

“Flee from the wrath to come.” But beloved friends, when Lot warned his sons-in-law and his neighbours and his married daughters, what did they do? “He seemed as one that mocked” to them. They did not take him seriously. They scorned what he was saying. They smiled at it. And that night they were in hell. “Flee from the wrath to come.” The angel said it to Lot, and he lingered, but the Lord was merciful to him and brought him out. “Flee from the wrath to come.” That is what Lot said to his family, and he was to them as one that mocked. Gospel preachers – unless the Holy Ghost apply the Word, unstop the ears, open the heart – gospel preachers are just like those who mock their congregation. This is the language that the minister is expected to say. But it still stands and it must stand; it will stand right down the ages to the end of time, the vital necessity to “flee from the wrath to come.”

And so if you and I are born again of the Spirit of God, we shall come here:

“What shall I do, or whither flee,
To escape the vengeance due to me?”

How can I escape? Where shall I flee? I see my danger, I know my danger, but where is the refuge? Where is the place of safety? Well, it is in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Fleeing from the wrath to come, it is fleeing to Him and to Him alone as the Saviour of sinners. “Able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him.” So, “Flee from the wrath to come,” to an almighty, willing Saviour, able to save even to the uttermost all fleeing from the wrath to come.

And how do we flee? By faith. So often we have faith spoken of in Scripture as a fleeing for refuge to Jesus. We read of those blessed with

strong consolation. Who are they? They “who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before them.” What does the psalmist say in his troubles? “I flee unto Thee to hide me.” What did the prophet view? “Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows?” It is fleeing from the wrath to come. It is something that is very, very personal. It is something that is very, very urgent. It is in prayer that we flee from the wrath to come to an almighty Saviour. “Jesus, save me, or I die.”

“Flee from the wrath to come.” It is a fleeing to the righteousness of Christ because we have none of our own. It is a fleeing to the Rock of Ages, to “embrace the Rock for want of a shelter,” to seek a hiding place in His wounded side. It is a fleeing to Calvary. It is a fleeing to the blood of Jesus. It is a fleeing to the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. And there is safety there from the wrath of God. Our hymnwriter says,

“Fly, ye sinners, to yon mountain,
Where the purple stream does flow;
God has opened there a fountain,
Which will wash you white as snow.”

O for grace, O for the Spirit’s enabling, to flee for refuge to Jesus, to His glorious righteousness, to His precious, sin-atoning blood, to flee from the wrath to come!

And so it was on the Passover night. That was a night of God’s wrath. “The great day of His wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” But there was a place where Israel could flee, a divinely-appointed place, a place appointed in love and mercy, a lamb slain, a sacrifice offered, blood shed, and that blood sprinkled, applied to Israelite homes. Those who fled for refuge, once they entered, they were safe; they were secure. “The blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.” Now that is it. It is that fleeing for refuge as Israel did on the Passover night, and they were delivered from God’s wrath. They may not literally have run. Some of them might have been lame; some of them might have been carried; but in spirit they hasted beneath the blood, in spirit they fled for refuge to that place of safety, and there they were safe, and there they were secure from the wrath of God against sin.

But that Passover lamb slain and the blood shed pointed forward to Jesus, because if divine wrath must fall on the sinner, what about those who flee for refuge? What about those who feel their need? What about those who are divinely awakened? The wrath of God fell upon His beloved Son at Calvary that it might never fall upon those who flee for refuge to Him from the wrath to come. “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.”

“The Lord, in the day of His anger, did lay
Our sins on the Lamb, and He bore them away.
He died to atone for our sins, not His own;
The Father has punished for us His dear Son.”

“Flee from the wrath to come.” And what a mercy that the glorious gospel of the grace of God points out a refuge, a remedy, a way of escape, a place where the guilty sinner can flee, where he will be welcome, forgiven, delivered from the wrath of God, safe, secure, eternally. But O may the urgency of it be laid upon you by the Spirit of God tonight. May the Spirit of God convince you of the wrath to come and how you are liable to it. May the Holy Spirit show to you an almighty Saviour. May the Holy Spirit sweetly enable you to flee for refuge to Him and find peace there. In a word, it is what Joseph Hart says:

“He that better knows than we,
Bids us now to Jesus flee;
Humbly take Him at His word,
And your souls shall bless the Lord.”

“Flee from that wrath to come.”