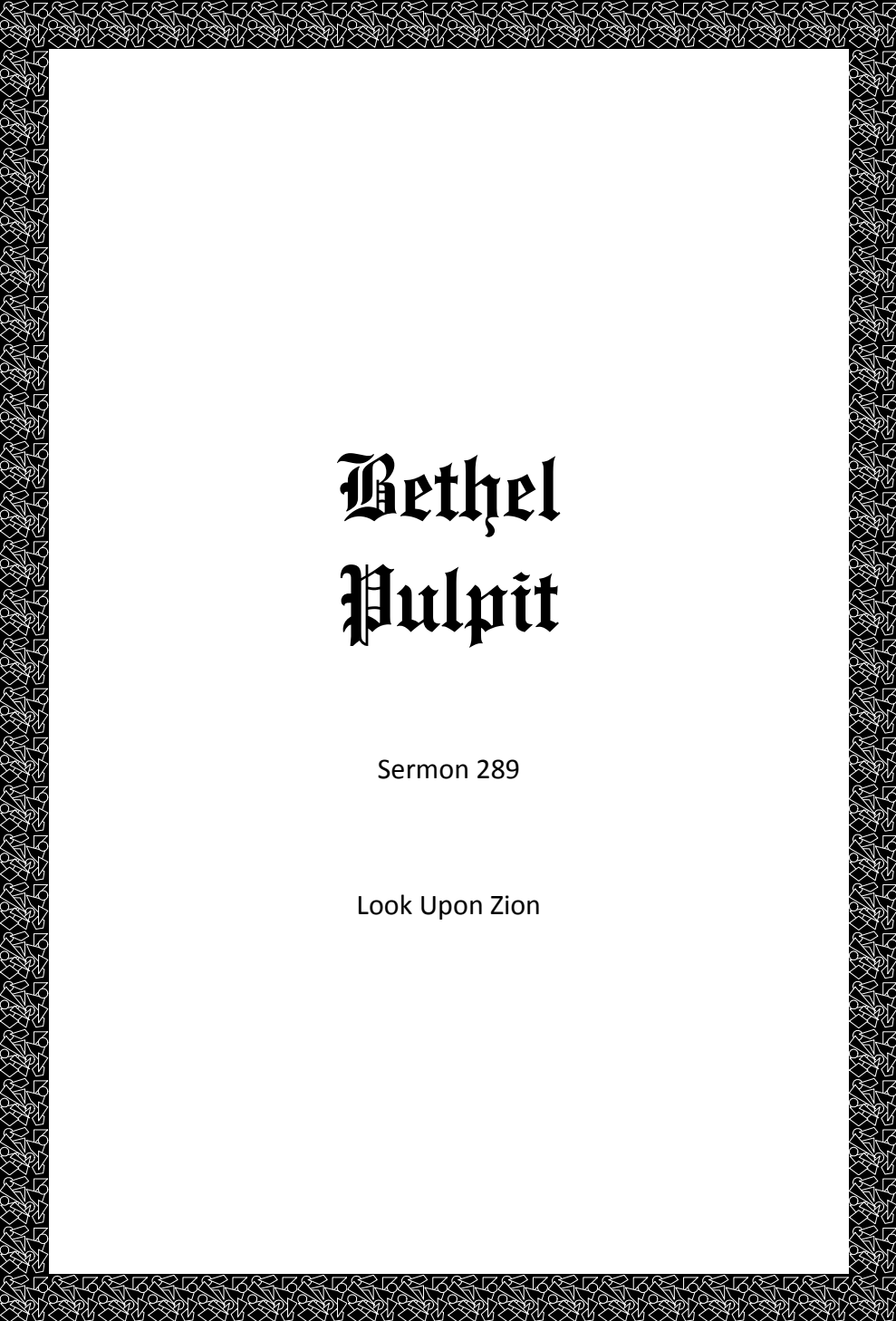




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 289

Look Upon Zion

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 12th July, 2009**

Text: *“Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken” (Isaiah 33. 20).*

As I have often said to you, most of these wonderful words in Isaiah have a two-fold meaning: an immediate, historical meaning, and then looking forward to New Testament days, a gospel meaning. Now this chapter concerns the city of Jerusalem being surrounded by Sennacherib and the Assyrian army – the darkness, sorrow, King Hezekiah in sackcloth – and the glorious deliverance.

Just take that verse for instance: “Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty.” It has an immediate meaning. Hezekiah was in sackcloth, but there was going to be such a victory. Once again he would be seen in all the glory of his royalty. “Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty.” But beloved friends, what does the Word of God mean if we are going to limit it just to that historical, immediate meaning? What a blessed, beautiful verse that is! What a comfort it has been made to many of the Lord's dear people! “Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off.”

So with this verse, immediately it speaks of the literal Jerusalem. It was the city of solemnities where the solemn feasts were kept, the Passover, Pentecost, and so on. It was anything but a quiet habitation – the noise, the tumult – but they were going to see peace, a quiet habitation, and they were going to see it safe, secure, protected by God. But again, beloved friends, that means nothing to us today. We look at this word in the sense of our beautiful hymn:

“Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!”

Which of course is based firmly on Scripture, the eighty-seventh Psalm.

Here we have the church of God spoken of as *Zion*; not just the earthly Jerusalem – *Zion*, the church of God, His blood-bought people in all ages. There are many, many different ways in which the blessedness of

God's people is brought before us in Scripture. You think of the sheep – that speaks specially of the loving, tender, watchful care of their Shepherd, the sheep of Christ's fold. The bride of Christ – that speaks especially of how dearly they are loved by Christ the heavenly Bridegroom. Branches of the living Vine – that speaks especially of their closeness, their nearness, their union with Jesus. And so we might go on. In many places in Scripture we have the church of God spoken of as a city. "In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks." And of course the great point of God's people being compared to a city is this: their safety, their strength in Christ, their security, their blessedness.

"Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities." That sure foundation, built on Christ the Rock of Ages, surrounded by the walls of salvation, the King there in His beauty in the midst, the streams of that glorious river that make glad the city of our God, the heavenly dew, so refreshing, that falls upon the mountains of Zion. "For there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore."

In my early days spiritually, I was very, very attracted by these beautiful comparisons, these beautiful descriptions that the Holy Spirit gives of the church of God, and I used to find this a very attractive subject: Zion, the church, the dwelling place of God, this glorious "city which hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God." This city is impregnable; down the ages it has stood and will stand and must stand for ever. And especially this point: that what is true of the whole city, the whole church of God, is true of every individual member. O to be one of these "blest inhabitants of Zion, washed in the Redeemer's blood!"

So we are called upon to contemplate this subject. Well, we do in the forty-eighth Psalm. "Walk about Zion, and go round about her." Admire her towers and her bulwarks, her battalions. Look at her strength. Notice that there has never been a crack in her walls and never will. "Tell the towers thereof." We have something to tell. The church of God in Christ – lost, ruined, guilty in self, but standing eternally complete in Jesus. "Walk about Zion, and go round about her." It is a call to each one. It is a call to our young people. It is a call to seeking souls and it is a call to the enemies of the church of God. "Walk about Zion." Carefully scrutinise her. Beloved friends, this morning may we by God-given faith look upon

Zion and see Zion's blessedness and glory in Christ. And may it be this: O that through mercy I might be one of these blessed inhabitants in Zion.

"Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities." Look upon Zion in wonder and amazement that a holy God should ever bestow such favours on such ruined, guilty sinners. Look upon Zion like that. Look upon Zion in admiration, to see the wonders of free grace in God's choice and love and redemption and blessing and protection of His unworthy but so dearly-loved people. Look upon Zion like that. Look upon Zion with thanksgiving, that God has done so much for His people in Christ, and He still does. He will never leave them nor forsake them. Look upon Zion with desire, with longing. Look upon Zion in prayer. O that I might be one of those of whom it is said, "Of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her." O may I be a born-again citizen of Zion. "And the highest Himself shall establish her. The Lord shall count, when He writeth up the people" – that is in the great day – "that this man was born there," born in Zion. O look upon Zion like that, with a prayer, with a question, with a longing, with a desire, with an exercise. Do not just look upon it carnally, historically, interestingly. O through grace may we look upon it, look upon Zion graciously, look upon Zion in repentance, look upon Zion in faith and in love.

"My soul shall pray for Zion still,
While life or breath remains;
There my best friends, my kindred dwell;
There God my Saviour reigns."

Now there are some of you here this morning, you dare not say you are an inhabitant in Zion – you are a bit fearful – but you can say this:

"There my best friends, my kindred dwell;
There God my Saviour reigns."

"Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities." Well, the things of God *are* solemn. People do not like that today. In the world people will excuse anything but seriousness, solemnity. But life is solemn and death is solemn and the judgment day is solemn and the sufferings and blood-shedding of Christ were solemn. Zion is "the city of our solemnities." What are Zion's solemnities? Well, the public worship, the preaching of the gospel, believer's baptism, the Lord's supper, weddings, funerals – so we might go on. Zion's solemnities.

“Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation.” Well, if you were to take it literally, Zion was anything but a quiet habitation, if you think of all that was going on in Jerusalem from this day forward. But the church of God, a quiet habitation. Well, you say, there are a lot of turmoils, aren’t there? There are two ways you can look on Zion. You can look on Zion, the church of God, as you *see* Zion [that is, outwardly], and you can look on Zion as you see Zion in Christ. Well, there is a difference. As you see Zion in Christ, O you see the perfection of beauty, the perfection of holiness. You see Zion without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. If you look on Zion in itself, you see the faults and failures and disagreements of the Lord’s people. But O for eyes this morning to have a glimpse of God’s people in Christ. It is a blessed view. I believe often at the beginning of a work of grace, the Holy Spirit will give you a glimpse of Zion as she stands eternally complete in Jesus, and O what a blessed sight there! “Thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation” – peace made by the blood of His cross. O to know that peace personally and savingly!

“Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down.” At first this strikes us as very strange, and at first it seems rather difficult to understand. The Holy Spirit here is speaking of a glorious city, such a city that all are called to look on it with wonder and amazement and admiration, a city which is so strong. Yet even in the same sentence, the Holy Spirit is speaking of Zion as a tabernacle, a flimsy tent. It seems strange at first. I take it to mean this. We can view the church of God in all its glories, strength, safety, stability, not in itself but in Christ, but then we need to be reminded, to have this other view of what the people of God are, what the church of God is, in itself – just that tabernacle, that flimsy tent. Now when Isaiah wrote this, Israel was a nation of tent-dwellers, and they knew what it was constantly to be having to take down their tents and move on, and then pitch those tents again, and they knew what it was to have those tents blown down.

Speaking very simply this morning, some of you on your holidays have set up your tents and perhaps one night there has been a severe gale and the tent pegs have been uprooted and your tent has been blown down. It is a very blessed point, a very beautiful point the Holy Spirit is making here. The church of God can be a glorious city, but the church of God knows that in itself it is weak and helpless. It is like a flimsy tent. But if

the Lord says, well, it may be, and you may feel it, and in yourself you *are* just like that flimsy tent, but it can never be blown down. The wonder of it, the mercy of it! That point seemed very sweet to me this week: “A tabernacle that shall not be taken down.” All the power of Satan, all the power of hell can never dismantle that tent, can never uproot one stake, can never break one cord. Here we are in all our helplessness and sinfulness, but to see this, through grace “a tabernacle that shall not be taken down.” Dear child of God, here is your safety your security, your salvation, your heaven, and it is all in Christ, and it is all by His divine, almighty power.

“Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem ... a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken.” If the tent pegs or the stakes are not removed, not uprooted, and if the cords remain firm, they are not broken, then the tabernacle is secure.

“Not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed.” Now then, this is a subject for you. What are Zion’s stakes? What is the analogy? What is it to which the church of God is bound fast? What is it to which it is secured? What are these immovable things? I take it to be all the precious truths of the gospel, all the glorious truths of the gospel. These are Zion’s stakes, and they are fastened secure, and they can never be removed. What are they? The covenant of grace ordered in all things and sure. That is a stake that can never be removed, and it is your mercy and mine if we are secured in it. The eternal union between the sinner and Jesus in bonds of grace. Now that is one of Zion’s stakes that can never be removed. How Satan would try to uproot these stakes, to remove them, but he never has, he never will, he never can. Not one of the stakes can ever be removed. The power of Christ to save to the uttermost “the vilest sinner out of hell, who lives to feel his need.” Now that is a stake and Satan has never been able to remove that. O to be fastened to these things, to be secured to them! The atonement, the precious blood of Christ that cleanses from all sin. O what a precious stake that is, how solid, how secure! That precious blood that can “never lose its power, till all the ransomed church of God be saved, to sin no more.” To be secured there, to be anchored there. Zion’s stakes. The righteousness of Christ, that glorious righteousness freely given to those who have none of their own, that perfect, holy, spotless righteousness of Jesus which is theirs by imputation, which they can never lose. Zion’s stakes, these solid, immovable things.

And then you can think of all the promises. He hath “given unto us exceeding great and precious promises.” They are all yea and amen in Christ. You think of them. How many there are, and they just meet the sinner’s need. So many promises made to those who are fearful; so many promises made to those who are weak; so many promises to those who are helpless. “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness.” A precious promise made to those who long for salvation, to seeking, venturing sinners: “Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.”

Well, these stakes are so secure, they are fastened securely. God Himself has fixed and fastened and secured them. They can never be removed. It is your mercy and mine if we are attached to them. The everlasting security of the people of God: “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.” Zion’s stakes. “Not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed.” So we have a very blessed view of this glorious city, but it is equally encouraging when we have this other view of what the church of God is in itself, yet despite its weakness, helplessness, unworthiness, it is safe; it is secure.

“Thine eyes shall see Jerusalem ... a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken.” Now what are Zion’s cords? Well, I think there is only one place in Scripture, that is in Hosea’s prophecy, when we read of the cords and the word tells us they are *the cords of love*. He says, “I drew them with cords of a Man, with bands of love.” So what does this mean? The everlasting love of God to His people in Christ, and that is what secures the whole church of God, and that is what secures every believer, and that is what fastens the tabernacle to these unmoveable stakes. The stakes cannot be moved; the cords cannot be broken. Old John Warburton of Trowbridge said, “The cords of God’s everlasting love are secured in eternity at both ends, from everlasting to everlasting.” “The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.”

O the strength of these cords! What does the Song of Solomon say? “Love is strong as death.” If ever these cords of God’s eternal love

were tested, it was when the Saviour was on the way to Calvary. Even Peter tried to dissuade Him from going to the cross. There was the awful assault of Satan, and then Gethsemane. None of us can ever really comprehend the conflict of Gethsemane. Earlier we read: "What shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." You see that the cords stand firm; the cords cannot be broken. "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end."

"It were an easy part
For Him the cross to fly;
But love to sinners fills His heart,
And makes Him choose to die."

"Neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken." And these cords of God's everlasting love secured in eternity at both ends come right down in time, and they reach the case of a poor sinner, and they bind him fast, and they will never let him go to all eternity. When they bind him fast, at first he does not know it is love. He feels his need. He has to die. He is not right. There is the judgment day. He is a sinner.

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

These are the cords of love and they are holding him fast. And then the time comes when he feels something, a little or more, greater or less, of what these cords of divine love are as they take hold of him, as he knows something of the love of Jesus in mercy, in forgiveness, in accepting, in receiving him. And these cords are bound fast and secured round his soul for ever.

"Whom once He loves He never leaves,
But loves him to the end."

"Neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken." But there will be times in your life when you are assailed by Satan, you are sorely tempted, unbelief seems to prevail, you come into deep water, you have a pathway of sorrow, your carnal heart rebels, you wonder why. And then, even then, these cords of God's love are holding you fast, holding you secure. They will never, never let you go. And they bind you to these immoveable stakes. They bind you as part of the tabernacle, Zion's

tabernacle. They bind you as part of this glorious city, the city of the living God.

Well, what a theme and what a subject! So look upon it, says the Lord. Look upon it, “Zion, the city of our solemnities.” But do not forget, Zion, a tabernacle that shall never be taken down; Zion, not one of its stakes shall ever be removed; Zion, none of its cords shall ever be broken. Now the call is to look upon it as the Lord enables you, and O may it be your blessed portion and mine as we look on Zion to be able to say this, through grace:

“Saviour, if of Zion’s city
I through grace a member am;
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy name
Fading is the worldling’s pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure,
None but Zion’s children know.”