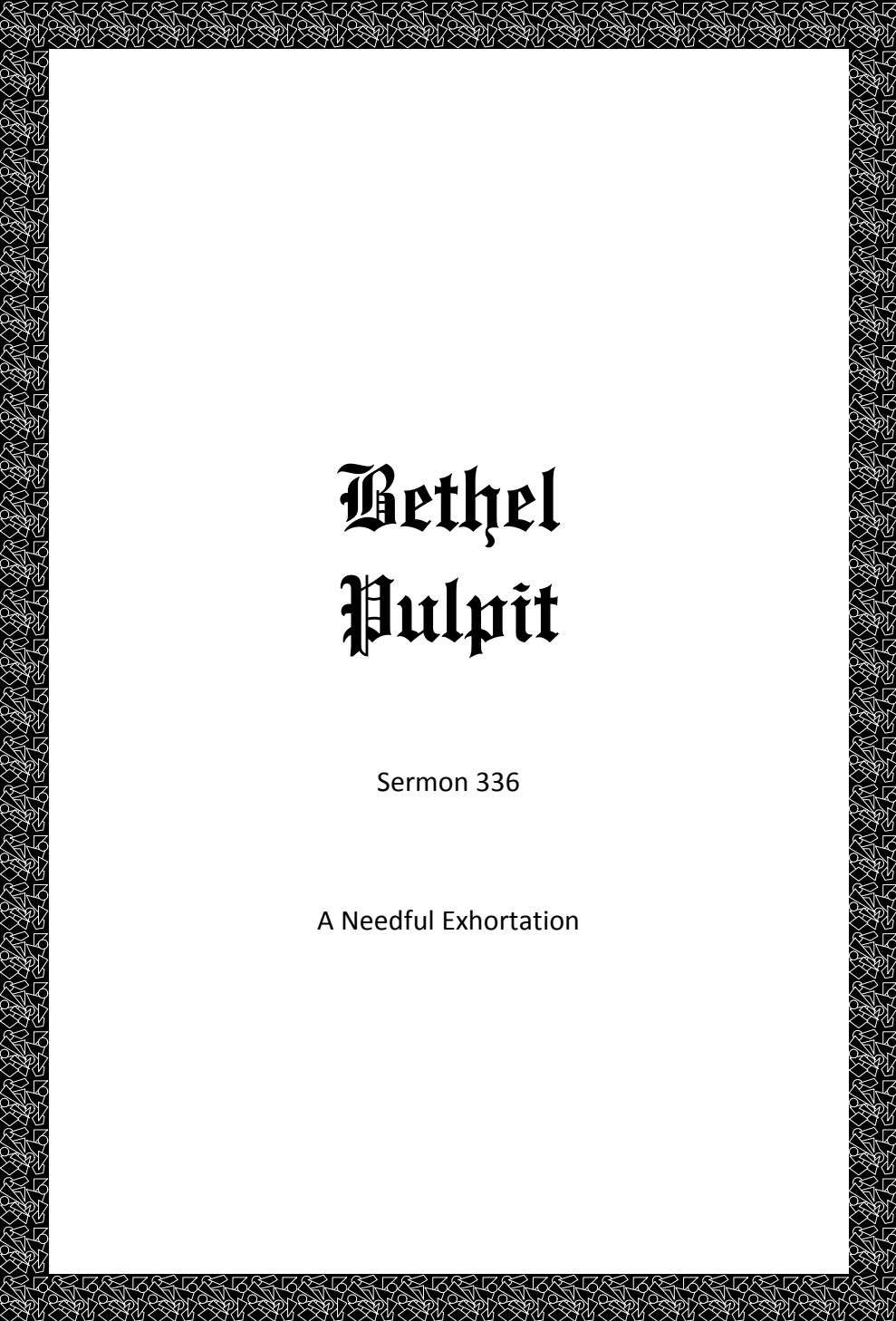




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 336

A Needful Exhortation

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 2nd May, 2013**

Text: *“But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 20, 21).*

At first this word sounds strangely on our spirits. It seems to be exhorting us to do things which none but Almighty God can do. We are told to build up ourselves. We are told to keep ourselves in the love of God. Now let us be very clear, beloved friends, as we come to the Word of God, the Word does not always stop and pause and qualify and explain. The whole of Scripture has made clear the sinner’s complete inability, even if wrought upon by grace, his sinfulness, his helplessness, his dependence on the Lord. The apostle knew all this when he wrote these things by divine inspiration. Really, it is a word something like this: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” But on that occasion the Lord does clearly explain it: “For it is God which worketh in you.” You could really see that scripture written right across these words I have read to you: “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

Really this is an exhortation to the people of God in dark, evil, solemn days to hold fast and to be prepared, not to be negligent, not to be slothful, not to be careless. There is an activity here, an activity of grace. There are the exercises of a living soul here, but there is no creature merit, no legality here. It is all in complete and utter dependence upon the Lord Himself. But we do need these words. We need this stirring up. We need these warnings.

There is a background to this word. When you have a text, a scripture which begins, “But ye,” well, you must pause and think what has been happening before. Terrible things – terrible things in the world, terrible things in the professing church of God, Satan’s work, evil men waxing worse and worse, evil men deceiving the people. So we might go on. There are some very solemn warnings in this chapter: all this evil and all these wicked men and all these deceivers. “But ye.” And the simple point is this: the Lord’s people are called to be different, and if their

religion is real, they will be different, and they will not be lying on a bed of ease, but tempted by Satan, opposed by the world, with indwelling sin. There is a fight, a conflict, a pathway to be walked out. So this is the way the Lord's people are called to walk in a day of spiritual declension, not just in the world, but in the professing church of God and in our own hearts. So if you will, it is a warning, a call to vital godliness, a warning against deadness, a warning against slumbering and sleeping, but not that the sinner can do this himself; it is in complete dependence on the Lord. "But ye." O may grace make us different. May grace enable us to walk worthy of our high calling.

"But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith." So immediately we are reminded that our faith is a most holy faith, and of course you can take it both the ways in which faith is mentioned. Sometimes when we read of faith, it is that body of gospel doctrine, that body of divine truth, that he tells us we have to contend earnestly for. "Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Then faith is a grace.

"Faith! 'tis a precious grace,
Where'er it is bestowed;
It boasts of a celestial birth,
And is the gift of God."

But whichever way you think of faith, the faith of God's elect, it is "your most holy faith." So the glorious doctrines of the gospel are holy. They speak of a holy God. They speak of a holy Saviour. They speak of a holy way to heaven, "the King's highway of holiness." They also speak of our unholiness. We need to be made holy through the blood of Christ. And the glorious doctrines of the gospel known and felt and experienced in the heart will always have a holy, sanctifying effect.

If you want to find what real, spiritual prosperity is, where the Lord's blessing rests, so many different kinds of profession today, who are the people who are right? Well, you look at the way they walk and the way they talk and the way they behave and the way they act and the way they worship, and see if it is this: according to our most holy faith. Does it abase the sinner and honour God?

But then take faith the other way: that is as a grace. If our religion is real, the Holy Spirit will bless us with that faith which looks to Jesus and rests on Him, pleads His merit alone, flies to the fountain of His blood. But it is a most holy faith. We are told two or three things about real faith. It is not just believing the Bible is true. It is that, but it is more than that. “Your most holy faith.” Now we are told it purifies the heart, and then we are told it works by love, and then we are told it overcomes the world. “Your most holy faith.”

“Building up yourselves on your most holy faith.” Well, the important thing is to be building on a good foundation, and if you are blessed with true faith, you will not be satisfied with anything else, and if you are led into the glories of the faith of God’s elect revealed in the gospel, you will see that there is one foundation laid for sinners in Zion in the Person and finished work of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and you will be brought to build there and to build there alone. “Building up yourselves on your most holy faith,” that sure foundation, that solid foundation. “Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

But it is *building* upon the foundation. They say that if a building is begun and then it is left unfinished, with nothing else being added to it, then it goes backwards and falls into ruin. So really this speaks of that word which does try God’s people: “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” “Building up yourselves on your most holy faith.” It is this: to be established in the things of God, to be established in the faith, not tossed about with every wind of doctrine. What a blessing established Christians are in the church of God! “It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace.” It is this being built up.

“Building up yourselves on your most holy faith.” Well of course, this is an expression that we do use naturally. Perhaps there is a child who is not very strong and we use this expression: he needs to be built up. Or perhaps there has been a person who has been very unwell and they are recovering. They have been brought through so far, but it is a time of convalescence, and people say, Well, what they need now is building up; they need to be built up. I think we all know what that means. “Building up yourselves on your most holy faith.” In that sense all of us are weak

and need to be built up. How are God's people built up? How is that invalid built up? Well, through the Word of God, through the preaching of the everlasting gospel, given a holy appetite by the Spirit of God, feeding on Christ, feeding on the rich provisions of the gospel, drinking from the water of the well of eternal life. "Building up yourselves on your most holy faith." Beloved friends, as a congregation, as a church, personally, in our profession, and in our private exercises, in our innermost soul, may we have that earnest desire that we might be built up, that we might be established, because we all need it, and it is to the honour and glory of God, and it is in dependence on Him.

"But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost." Really this is the secret. If you will, it is the key to both these verses. If we are to be built up, if we are to keep ourselves, the vital importance of prayer, the wonderful privilege of prayer, a great and glorious High Priest who knows and understands and sympathises and cares, a throne of grace, a promise of mercy, grace to help in time of need, a mercy seat sprinkled with blood where sinners are welcome, the Lord almighty with heaven and earth at His command waiting to answer prayer. That is the only way we can really be built up and the only way we can keep ourselves and be established, and that is as we have to pray our way along, "praying in the Holy Ghost." Now may we seek that prayer, because there is such a thing as formal prayer. Wasn't it M'Cheyne who used to say, "O my prayerless prayers!"? And then we read of Elijah. He prayed earnestly, and the margin says, "He prayed in his prayer." One of the precious enablings of God the Holy Ghost is to teach a sinner to pray and to help him to pray, to enable him to pray, to give him a spirit of prayer, to show him what to pray for and how to pray. We sing it in our little hymn to the Holy Ghost:

"Teach us for what to pray, and how;
And since, kind God, 'tis only Thou
The throne of grace canst move,
Pray Thou for us."

"Praying in the Holy Ghost." May we personally, may we as a congregation be blessed with this wonderful blessing, because it is this prayer indited by the Holy Ghost that the Lord hears.

But really I take the point here, it is a warning against empty formality, against just repeating a prayer, slothfulness in our devotions. I know in the riches of His mercy Almighty God answers some very poor prayers for Jesus' sake, but may we together be graciously helped, graciously taught to pray. May it be real prayer. May it be importunate prayer. May it be wrestling prayer. May it be diligent prayer.

“Keep yourselves in the love of God.” This seems strange. The love of God is from everlasting to everlasting. And Jesus, “having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” What can it mean? If you are a child of God, surely you will be kept in the love of God. How can we seek to obey this exhortation, to keep ourselves in the love of God? One thing: praying in the Holy Ghost, that we might be kept with a spirit of sweet meditation on the love of God. May we be kept in the love of God in that sense, to meditate on the everlasting love of the Father, entering into covenant with His beloved Son, setting Him up as His people's Surety and Saviour and everlasting All, in the fulness of time giving Him, sending Him. But meditate on the love of God to sinners, so unmerited, so free, so undeserved. As the apostle says, “The breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.”

“Keep yourselves in the love of God,” praying in the Holy Ghost for it. And then meditating on the love of Christ, that love which took the Saviour to Calvary, to see the wonders of dying love and atoning blood. We trust we have been there, but we are not always there. Sometimes we are seldom there, and sometimes it seems a long time since we were there, and if we come there, it is not for long. May the Holy Ghost *keep* us there. “Keep yourselves in the love of God.” Christ suffering, “the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.”

Then the love of God the Holy Ghost in inspiring the Scriptures, in the mysterious conception of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in His work of mercy in a sinner's heart. These things we have in this chapter. “Preserved in Jesus.” O to be kept, to be kept mindful of these things, to be kept in memory of them.

“Keep yourselves in the love of God.” But then another way in which God's people are exhorted to keep themselves in the love of God, and that is to seek to walk in love. “As ye have therefore received Christ

Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him.” Now how did you receive Him? Well, when you first received Him, you received Him in love. “So walk ye in Him.” O this walking in love! “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself.”

“Keep yourselves in the love of God.” Of course, there is the other way of considering it. That is the love of God to the sinner, but what about the sinner’s love to God? Well, it is an exhortation: “Keep yourselves in the love of God.” This is where we fail, we falter, we fall. Like the church at Ephesus: “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.” We trust we have known the love of Christ. We trust we could say, “Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee.” O but in our affections we have not kept ourselves in the love of God. We have wandered after idols – sometimes right things, but inferior things.

“Keep yourselves in the love of God.” It is praying in the Holy Ghost; it is in complete dependence; it is seeking His honour and glory; it is realising our unworthiness; and as you are praying in the Holy Ghost, you will turn these things into prayers. Am I commanded to build up myself? Lord, in Thy love and mercy build me up. And am I commanded to keep myself? Lord, in love and mercy keep me. Because as he comes to the end, he sees it all in mercy. “Looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” Now it is mercy all from the beginning to the end, and we are exhorted here to look for it. Under a sense of our unworthiness, what else can we look for?

“Mercy, through blood, I make my plea;
O God, be merciful to me!”

Are there any of you this evening looking for the mercy of God? Blind Bartimaeus did; the Syrophenician woman did; so many who came to the Lord in the days of His flesh did. They were looking for mercy because they felt their unworthiness. But this is the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is only because of His mercy we ever have these exhortations. It is only because of His mercy that in any way we are able to walk in obedience to these exhortations. But the apostle here looks right through it all to the end: “eternal life.” Well, there is not much life in this chapter. If you go through it verse by verse, there is darkness and death; there is death and darkness. You have it in the world. You have it

in the professing church of God. “But ye, beloved,” called to be different, led by the Spirit of God, made different. Well you will look beyond everything else and it will be eternal life that you long for. That is why when you are so tried and tempted to go away, you cannot. “Will ye also go away?” You say, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” It is a wonderful blessing. It is made known here through the Person and merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

“Jesus, Thy Godhead, blood, and name,
O! ’tis eternal life to know.”

“This is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.”

But it is mercy; it is mercy all; it is free mercy; it is sovereign mercy; it is immense mercy from first to last, that guilty sinners should be spared eternal death and be blessed with eternal life. It is looking right to the end, when we pass from time into eternity. Don’t you feel these warnings that we have solemn, or do they not touch your heart? Perhaps you say, I am only young. Some are older. But O to be made right, to be made ready, to feel the awfulness of eternal death, to realise our unworthiness, to know what our just desert is, and O if it might be everlasting life in the end. We have some of those beautiful Scriptures. “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” You say, Lord Jesus, this is what I seek and what I long for, but I am unworthy; I do not deserve it.

“Looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” The ground, the only ground of our hope, the ground, the only ground of our finding eternal life at last! The wonders of mercy!

“Eternal life, at His request,
To every saint is given;
Safety on earth, and, after death,
The plenitude of heaven.”

That is eternal life and it is on the ground of mercy, the mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, mercy through His sin-atoning sacrifice and precious blood.

Well, what a word this is! There is a weight in it and a depth and a solemnity, but don't we need it? Don't we need that stirring up? And yet we come so far short in it all, and yet we would not have the standard lower. Now may the Lord bless us with His grace in humility, in dependence, looking to Him alone, to seek to walk out a word like this in the congregation, in our homes and lives and families, and especially personally, in our souls, in our pilgrimage, in this evil world.

“But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”