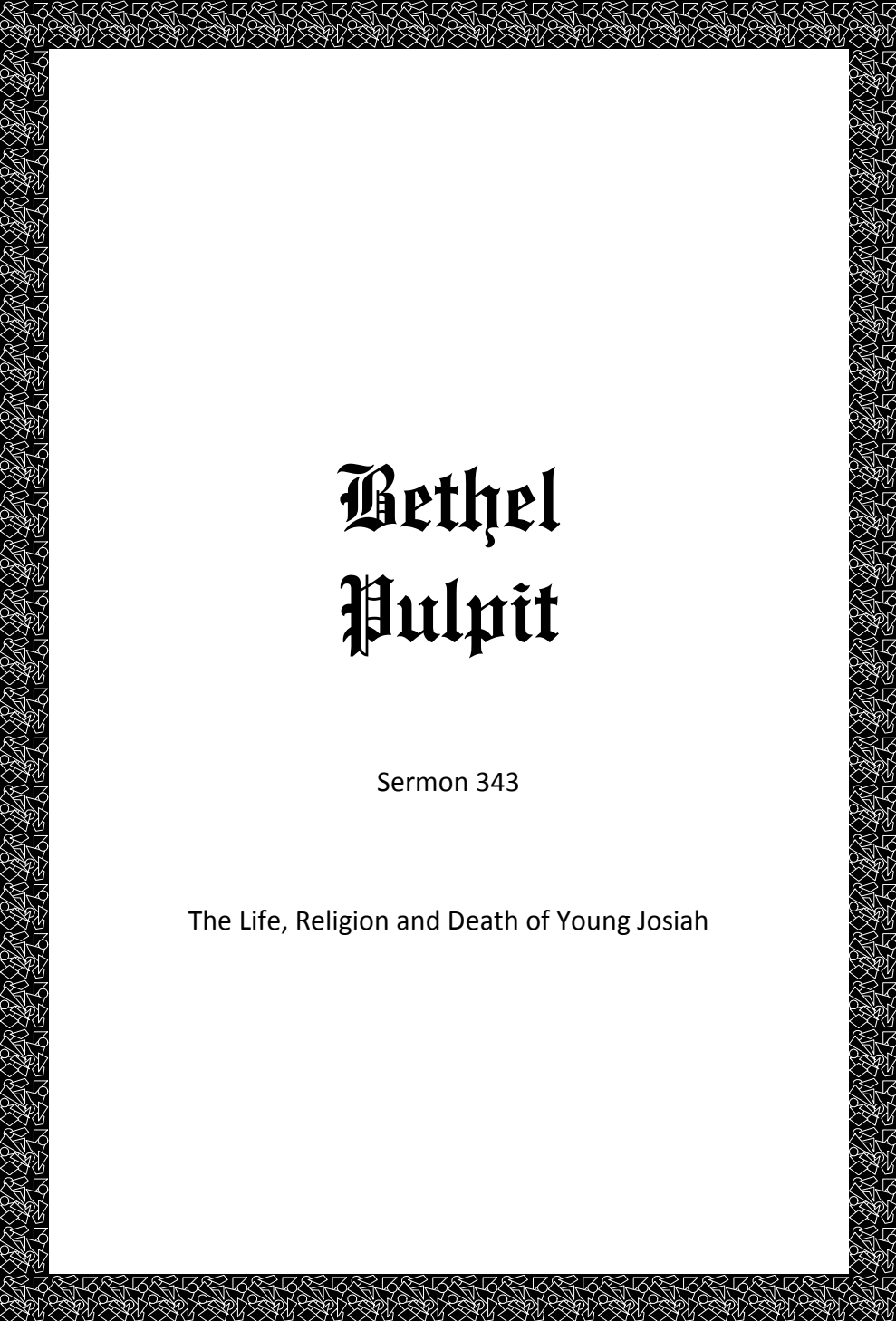




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 343

The Life, Religion and Death of Young Josiah

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 12th January, 2014**

Text: *"Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou heardest His words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbledst thyself before Me, and didst rend thy clothes, and weep before Me; I have even heard thee also, saith the Lord. Behold, I will gather thee to thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace, neither shall thine eyes see all the evil that I will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same. So they brought the king word again" (2 Chronicles 34. 27, 28).*

I understand that years ago at Bethersden Mr. Herbert Dawson had morning and afternoon services, but once a month there was an extra service, an evening service, and a sermon preached for young people. I understand those services were very well attended, and made exceedingly profitable. I have not heard of anything like that today, and of course it is nothing we have ever done here, but if you will, this is a young people's text, even a children's text, and a young people's sermon, even a children's sermon.

It begins with a little boy, eight years of age. Perhaps there are one or two of you here this evening eight years of age. But he became king. You think of a little boy and he is king of the land! When he was fifteen, we are told he began to seek the Lord, and he found Him. And what of those who are fifteen years old here this evening? I wonder how many of you have sought the Lord and have found Him. It is never too young to seek the Lord; it is never too young to find Him. And it is never too young to die. This boy Josiah lived to be a man, but not to be an old man. He was only thirty-nine years old when he died. There are a lot of people in this chapel tonight *over* thirty-nine years of age.

But when he was fifteen, he began to seek the Lord. Now there are so many encouragements in Scripture for us to seek the Lord – that is to seek the Lord Jesus, to seek His great salvation, to seek Him because we need Him, to seek Him because we must have Him, we cannot do without Him. We are dying sinners, however young we are. We are born to die. As sinners we need salvation; we cannot save ourselves. We are guilty; we are lost; we cannot find our way ourselves; we cannot return of ourselves.

Do you know what the Word of God says? *“It is time to seek the Lord.”* There are special encouragements to those who early in their life are sweetly enabled by the Holy Spirit as sinners to seek the Lord and to seek His great salvation. The Lord Jesus, speaking as incarnate Wisdom, kindly says, “I love them that love Me; and those that seek Me early shall find Me.” Josiah was fifteen when he began to seek the Lord. He was a great man; he was a king; but this was the thing that mattered. “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”

Now wherever religion is real, it will be seen, and in much of this chapter we see the effects of grace in young Josiah’s life, because when he became nineteen, he began to exert his royal authority. I suppose he could not do it when he was only a boy, or it would have been difficult, but when he became nineteen, the things in the land which were evil, he stopped them – the wickedness, the idolatry, the bad practices, the things that were going on which should not be. Now real religion will always have a sanctifying effect. “By their fruits ye shall know them.” And if a person is in any position of authority or responsibility, then he will not be ashamed to use that position for the honour and glory of God. Josiah did. There had been sixty years of wickedness. He had a most ungodly father and a most ungodly grandfather. Through mercy his grandfather Manasseh towards the end was blessed with the grace of God and forgiveness, but the dreadful effects of his evil reign still persisted.

This young boy, when he was nineteen, with these floods of iniquity in the land, and what could he do? He was determined to put them right. Sadly God’s vengeance still fell upon Judah because their cup of iniquity was full. Sadly the reformation that good Josiah wrought only seemed outward. People were willing to obey and go with him only as long as he lived. We are told an amazing thing. There was no other king like him (2 Kings 23. 25), which seems to imply he was the greatest of all the kings of Israel, not excepting his godly forefather, David, because Josiah was blessed with godliness and grace and we do not read of him falling into sin as we do with David.

Another thing: when the work of grace is real in a sinner's heart and the sanctifying effect of it, it will not just be in your life and your influence, but in your concern for the house of God. The house of God was in ruins, and there were all kinds of evils taking place, and even naturally there was a lot of rubbish there. But like David he could say, "I have set my affection to the house of my God," and there are some of you here this evening can say that, can't you? "Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thine honour dwelleth."

So there was a revival in the kingdom and the restoration of the house of God, of the temple – and then a most amazing thing took place. When the rubbish was being cleared out they found the only Bible there was then, the Book of the law of the Lord. They did not know it existed. It is not clear from this chapter, but it seems to imply it was the only copy of the Scriptures in existence in that day. You think of it – the Word of God lost in the house of God! Pausing here, there is much religion in England at present like this – what have been favoured houses of the Lord, and now the Word of the Lord is lost in the house of the Lord. Now may it never be so here. What is a nation, a church, a congregation, a family, a sinner personally, without this knowledge of the law of the Lord? It seems amazing that Josiah went so far in godliness when he did not know much of God's Word, only what had been handed down to him.

So this discovery. It was the holy Word of God. It was the Bible as they had it. And of course, the high priest and the scribe Shaphan took it to the king, and so the king was delighted that the law of the Lord, the Book of the Lord, had been found. But when they began to read it to him, he trembled. The Holy Spirit was at work. He felt there were so many things in his kingdom that were not according to the Word of the Lord, not for His honour and glory, not right in His sight. But he felt it personally, even more than the kingdom, and reading what we have read, he seems to have been really godly, but he trembled and he fell under it. "By the law is the knowledge of sin" – the preaching of the truth. And you will realise,

"Thine's alas! a lost condition;
Works cannot work thee remission,
Nor thy goodness do thee good."

So he sent for advice and for a word from the Lord to the prophetess – which sounds strange on our ears. But is that a mark of the

dreadful decline there was in the kingdom of Judah at that time, that God was no longer even speaking through the priests? There was a prophetess, as there had been even before with Deborah in the Book of the Judges, and she sent back the answer, an answer she received from Almighty God for this young, godly king Josiah. Devastation was going to come upon them. Judah was going to be destroyed. Israel had already been destroyed. The kingdom of Judah would last about twenty years after Josiah's death and not a single good thing said about it or its kings that followed. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." There is a time when the cup of iniquity with any nation is filled up and with that nation it is too late for repentance. Then divine vengeance must fall. You wonder whatever is going to happen to England, unless mercy intervenes.

But for Josiah personally there was this message sent to him that he would be safe, he would be secure. He would come to his grave in peace. He would never perish, and even when he came to die, that would be a mercy, because he was delivered never to see the evil which was to come upon his land. And all this came to pass as we can read.

So this word from the Lord to Josiah. I do want to linger here a moment and speak of what I consider a very important thing, the way we approach this. If you will, these are the marks of a real work of grace, of the Spirit's work of grace in the Old Testament as in the New. These are the marks of real conversion. This is what a person is, what a person will know, if the Lord deals with him, if the Lord saves him and if the Lord fits and prepares him for heaven. Now that is abundantly clear. But the point I want to make very strongly is this: this was still under the dark dispensation of the Old Testament. Christ had not yet come. There was not the full, sacred, sweet revelation of the gospel. The way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest. Christ had not yet cried, "It is finished," and made the atonement and saved His people with an everlasting salvation. Mind you, Josiah and all the Old Testament saints were saved on the same ground as sinners saved by grace are saved today. They looked forward; we look back. But those like Josiah saw it so dimly.

Why am I saying this? Well, if the Lord brings us into this real concern through hearing the law read, it is not for us to be looking round for some prophetess and running after her and asking her what she thinks.

The wonderful privilege under the gospel, a guilty sinner may approach a holy God in Christ and ask for mercy and ask for forgiveness and plead the blood and plead the promises. There they were still in that dark dispensation of the Old Testament, though Josiah went to heaven exactly on the same ground, through the finished work of Christ.

Now the marks here that are given of true conversion and a real preparation for heaven are the same as today apart from for one thing. The Old Testament emphasis is possessing the fear of the Lord in a sinner's heart. Here are all the clear evidences that a work of grace had begun and God by His Holy Spirit had put the fear of the Lord, a mark of eternal life, into the heart of Josiah. And so we have these things: "Thine heart was tender"; "thou didst humble thyself"; "thou didst rend thy clothes, and weep before Me"; "I have even heard thee" – so there must have been prayer. But when we come to this in New Testament language, there is something that abounds above it all, and to put it to you in three words tonight, and there is salvation in them, and there is love in them: "Looking unto Jesus."

That is the important thing. I believe Josiah knew something of it, but it was so dimly, so dark. The point here is that work in his heart making him tender in the fear of the Lord. It is just the same with a sinner today, but with a sinner today, "Out of self to Jesus lead," fleeing for refuge to the hope set before you. The beautiful hymn we have sung really opens up everything that was missing in Old Testament religion, speaking of Christ:

"Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee."

Lord Jesus, Thou alone I want, and here is all my hope. "Let me to Thy bosom fly."

But having cleared the ground on this vital matter, here is true religion, here is the preparation for eternity, here is the preparation to die, and here is the preparation to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Here is God's work; here is a sinner prepared; here is a sinner made different. And the point is, do you and I know what Josiah knew, here in this gospel day? Because like him, you and I must die. He was thirty-nine years old when he died. "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after

this the judgment.” The vital need to be made right, to be made ready, to be prepared, and Josiah felt it and he got the answer and he came to his grave in peace. And it will be your mercy and mine if through the grace of God and His Spirit’s preparation and in Christ we are brought to the grave in peace at last.

“None but Jesus!
None but Jesus!’
From His blood our hopes arise.”

Now, let us look at Josiah’s religion and see if we have it. There was a difference made between him and the world around, and between him and what he once was. “Ye must be born again.” No salvation without the Lord’s work, the new birth, and if the Lord’s work takes place in your heart, there will be a difference. You will be different from what you once were, and there will be a difference from those around you, and it will be this: the holy fear of God will be put in your heart. That does not mean being frightened of Him, though you may well be frightened of Him at first. It means that loving awe and reverence for Him. We are told three times in Scripture that this is the beginning, and that was specially the emphasis on what real religion was in the Old Testament – the possession of the fear of the Lord. But really it is the same point today. Unless you and I possess the fear of the Lord, we have not yet begun in divine things.

“Because thine heart was tender.” The fear of the Lord is a tender grace. We speak about the tender, filial fear of God. Your heart will no longer be hard. It will not be hard to the Lord’s warnings. It will not be hard to your sins, to your need. It will not be hard to eternity. It will not be hard to Christ. “I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh.”

“Because thine heart was tender.” O your heart will be affected – affected by the Word, by the preaching, by the teaching of the Spirit of God. “Because thine heart was tender” – tender in the fear of God. Your religion will be personal. It will be real. It will be daily. You will have a sense of your need, a sense of your sin. Your religion will be before an all-seeing God, and your heart will be made tender. It will be made tender in this: you will not want to grieve Him. There may be things your old flesh longs to do. “So did not I, because of the fear of God.” There may be

things you shrink from. “This is the way, walk ye in it,” in the fear of the Lord.

“Because thine heart was tender.” O do you know the difference – the difference between a hard heart and a soft heart? But especially coming to gospel days, in the light of Calvary, led there by the Spirit of God, as He

“Points out the place where grace abounds;
Directs us to the bleeding wounds
Of our incarnate God.”

And this is the place where the hardest of hearts is made soft. Has your heart ever been made tender with a sight of Christ and Him crucified? Have you ever been to the Garden by faith? Have you ever stood in the judgment hall? Have you ever heard Pilate come forth and say, “Behold the Man”? Then your heart will be tender, and you will know these other things.

“Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God.” Your pride will have gone, and your natural religion will have gone, and your opinion of yourself will have gone, and your self-righteousness will have gone, and you will be humbled; again in gospel days, you will be humbled at the feet of the Saviour. You will be nothing and He will be everything. But the grace of God in a sinner’s heart will never lift him up; it will never exalt him. It will always humble him.

“Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou heardest His words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof.” Here is a message. It is a message to all Jerusalem. It is a message to the two tribes of Judah, Judah and Benjamin. It is a message to the people. Here is the difference, and that is the difference in true hearing. Josiah fell before it and received it as belonging to himself. Here are these condemnations of his country; here are the things that are wrong; but he falls before it personally.

There was a very quaint preacher among the black slaves in those far-off days in North America, and he was preaching once and said that one great fault in congregations today is too much generosity, too much kindness. Of course, the people stood amazed. He said, “Let me explain.” He said, “When the minister speaks of some sin, this lady sitting here is so

kind and generous, she does not take it to herself; she passes it to someone the other side of the chapel. And that man there, you speak of something and what a warning it is, but he is so kind, so generous, he does not want it for himself. He can think of someone else in the chapel who needs it more than him.” I thought it was very quaint but there is a lot of good divinity in what that man was saying.

When we read the Word of God, is it personally, for ourselves? When the Word of God enjoins something or condemns something, do we go round the congregation and think, That just suits that one? Or is it, “Thou art the man”? That is what it was with Josiah. Here is this message to the Jewish nation, but with Josiah it was, “When thou heardest His words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbledst thyself before Me.” That is real religion. Me, Lord.

“Thou humblest thyself before Me, and didst rend thy clothes.” Of course, in Bible days in Israel and Judah, in sadness, in grief, they tended to be more demonstrative than we are. Later the Lord needed to say, “Rend your heart, and not your garments.” But it is this: Josiah was in earnest. The world is in earnest. You go out tomorrow in the streets or the shops; the world is in earnest seeking its pleasure and its wealth and its ambitions, even going shopping. The Word of God made Josiah earnest. He rent his clothes. It will make you earnest. There will be only one thing that matters. You know what the word means: “One thing is needful.”

“Thou ... didst rend thy clothes, and weep before me.” Real religion is not a laughing matter. I have always felt we should speak carefully on this point, but some of the old preachers said, If you have never cried all night, you will never get to heaven. Some people sleep more easily than others. Some people in their deepest sorrows fall asleep. Some people shed tears very easily, and some people never really shed a tear, but O the deep sorrow of their hearts! This is inward sorrow. “I will pour upon them the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him” – mourning over your lost, ruined condition; mourning over a crucified Saviour and what sin cost Him as He suffered and bled and died.

“Because ... thou didst ... weep before Me; I have even heard thee also, saith the Lord.” So if words mean anything at all, if the Lord says, “I have heard thee,” it means Josiah was praying, and he was obviously

praying for mercy and forgiveness. No doubt as he was so concerned with the temple he had a view of the high priest there and the lamb slain and blood shed and the sacrifice.

“Much more believers now,
In this more favoured day,
Should sing His praise, who since has come
And put their sins away.”

O that work of grace will bring you to pray, and it will bring you to pray that you might be ready, you might be right, you might be prepared, you might be forgiven. And now in the gospel a sinner concerned about his lost condition has an all-prevailing plea. That is the blood of Christ, and

“The vilest sinner out of hell,
Who lives to feel his need,
Is welcome to a throne of grace,
The Saviour’s blood to plead.”

“Behold, I will gather thee to thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace, neither shall thine eyes see all the evil that I will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same.” So this is a point concerning the death of a believer that we often forget: the righteous being delivered from the evil to come. It was made very clear that though Josiah died young, that was a mercy to him. He was taken to heaven and he was saved from all these dreadful turmoils and tribulation that were going to come upon his kingdom. “Thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace.” Now a child of God dies in peace, “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” peace made by the blood of Christ, peace made known to him personally. Not a false peace; delivered from a false peace. But those who have this experience, which is an experience of the new birth, a call by grace, true, saving, Holy Ghost conviction that Josiah had, then their end will be everlasting peace.

But there is a very interesting point here. God promised Josiah that he would come to his grave in peace, but he died a terrible death. He was slain in battle, and not only so, but it seems according to reading the Scripture that he made a mistake: he should never have gone to battle. There was no reason why ever he should have gone to battle. So he died in strange circumstances, and he died almost what you would call a gruesome

death. But the Lord said, “Thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace.” There is a lot to think about here. The wicked often seem to die in peace, lying comfortably on a bed surrounded with every comfort, and that is all the peace they will ever know to all eternity. But think of some of our martyrs who were burnt at the stake, and others of the early church when they were thrown to the lions, and think of many of the godly who have died like Josiah on the battlefield, and no-one here in this chapel knows what the circumstances of his last moments will be. But the point is this: if blessed with true religion and a living hope in Jesus, “Thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace.”

“So they brought the king word again.” So may our last thoughts today be of this coming to the grave in peace. Josiah was taught where true peace was to be sought, and he sought it and he found it, and there is only one place where true peace can be found, and that is in that glorious Man of whom we read, “And this Man shall be the peace,” the One who made peace between a holy God and guilty sinners by His precious blood, and so opened up a way to heaven; the One who gives peace to a troubled conscience; the One who says, “Peace, be still”; the One who is thy peace. O it is everlasting peace; it ends in heaven! Sometimes we sing so beautifully of it: “This glorious Man thy peace shall be.”

Well then, beloved friends, and you children, girls and boys and young people, here is this little boy – king when he is eight, at fifteen seeking the Lord, at nineteen the sanctifying effect, thirty-seven and he is dead. But that gracious preparation in the Holy Spirit’s work in his heart, the very thing each one in this chapel needs; and then the blessed, glorious end, because Josiah had it, and the blessed, glorious end we shall have if we have it: “Thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace.”