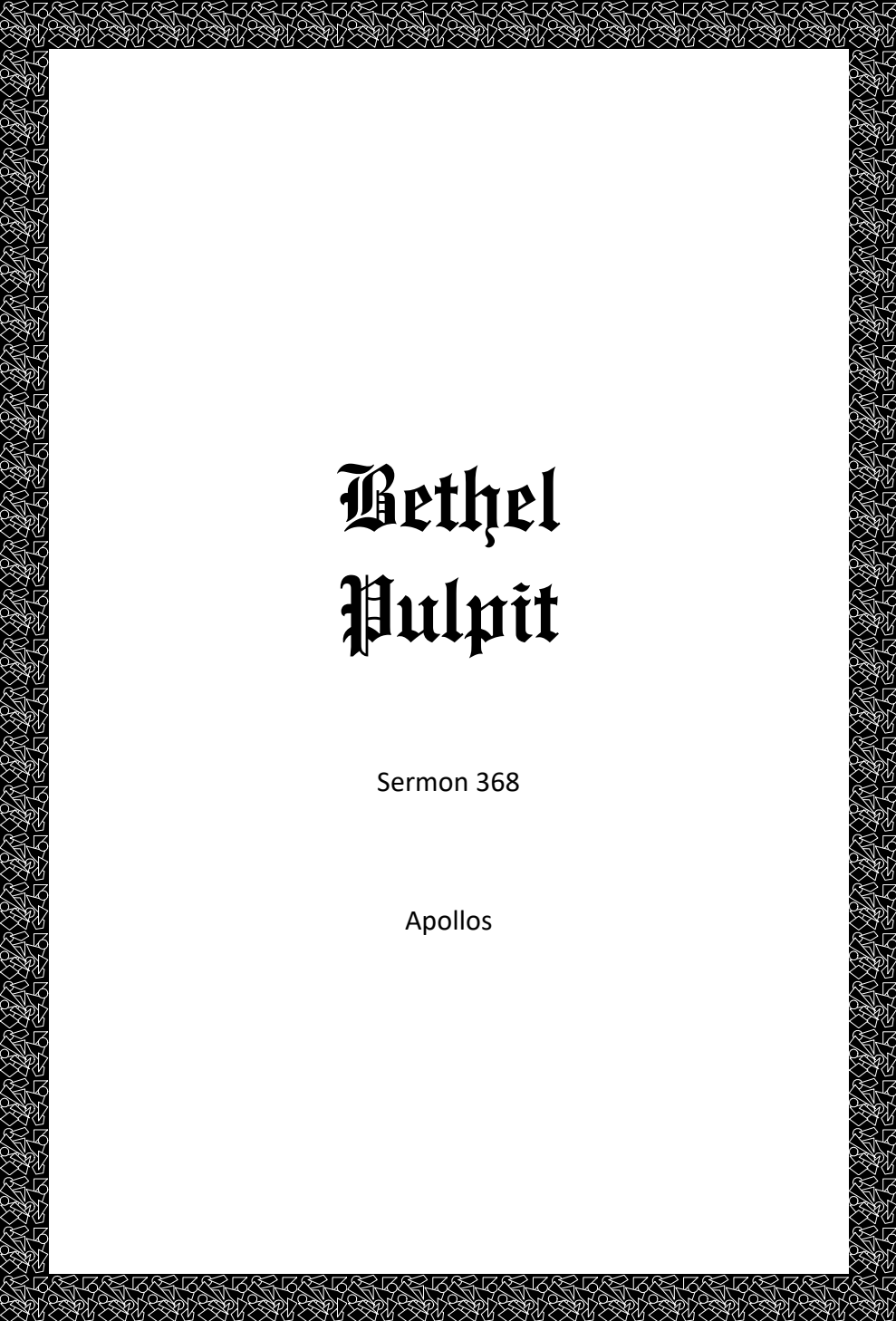




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 368

Apollos

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 3rd October, 2013**

Text: *“Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace” (Acts 18. 27).*

In these words we meet this interesting man, this remarkable man Apollos for the first time. Now this was at Ephesus, and without any warning, this young man appears from Alexandria. Just a word about Alexandria: it was the capital city of Egypt; it was the scene of much learning. Those of you who have heard of the Septuagint, that is the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, that was produced in Alexandria. It was the scene of religion. There were Jews there, Hellenists there, Egyptians there. It was the scene of learning.

Why Apollos should suddenly appear a few hundred miles away in the city of Ephesus, we hardly know. We do know it was according to the divine appointment and mysterious leadings of the Spirit of God. He was to be made a blessing in the early church. We find that the church at Corinth, as we read this evening (1 Corinthians 3), esteemed him almost equal to the Apostle Paul. Some of them esteemed him more than the Apostle Paul. And we are told what a remarkable man he was. It is clear he was a godly man and he was very concerned for the honour and glory of the Lord. Now as a preacher he was eloquent. As a preacher he was “mighty in the Scriptures.” And he had been well taught by the Spirit of God “the way of the Lord.” That is Christ; that is none but Jesus. And he was fervent in his spirit for the honour and glory of God, and when he spoke, he was very diligent in setting forth the truth as he knew it.

Now you think of a man like that suddenly appearing in our churches and in our congregations, what we would think! He was a man of God, and he was a great preacher, and God had clearly sent him, but there was a deficiency in his preaching; there was something the matter; there was something wrong; there was this deficiency. It is explained here that he knew only the baptism of John, which I take to mean something like this: he knew the truth as John the Baptist had preached it, the need for repentance, a sinner’s condemnation, his need of salvation. He knew all about the dear Lamb of God as John had preached Him that taketh

away the sin of the world. He knew all these things, but it would seem that he was not altogether clear on all the things that had happened afterwards, no doubt living so far away in Alexandria. He certainly had not heard of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. But whatever it was, there was this deficiency, something wrong with his preaching.

Now there were two people there in the congregation, a man and his wife, Aquila and Priscilla. I do not know whether you have noticed this, but whenever they are mentioned in Holy Scripture, they are always mentioned with honour and almost with reverence. In places it seems almost as if the Word of God goes out of its way to commend this godly man and his godly wife. For want of a better word, they were just ordinary people. They were not officers in the church; they were not preachers; they were not anybody; but they are always mentioned because of their godliness. Now they saw the deficiency in the preaching of Apollos and they felt they must try in love to deal with it for the good of Apollos and for the honour and glory of God, and I am sure they did it with much prayer.

I wonder how our churches would handle a matter like that, if we had a wonderful preacher, an eminent preacher, a popular preacher, and there was some deficiency, something wrong in his preaching! I want to speak very carefully and advisedly here, but you know what happens so often in a case like this. There is a division, a separation. Some people say, He is such a wonderful, godly man; these things he is saying cannot be wrong; they must be right; he is a godly man. Then you find another extreme, and people say, He seems to be bringing in a bit of error; God has never sent him; let us get rid of him.

How would we handle these things today? How did Priscilla and Aquila handle it? They took him aside quietly and in secret, and it is a beautiful expression: they “expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” I do not know whether more to admire the grace of God in Aquila and Priscilla or the grace of God in Apollos. You think, this great man, this wonderful man, this popular man. Everyone is following him. Look what we read of later in his life, what took place at Corinth. They almost idolised him. But he listened to this humble man and this humble woman. They were tentmakers. He listened to them in their own home, and as far as we can tell, he fell completely before everything they said.

What do you find in the next chapter? You find the wonderful blessing resting on this man's ministry at Corinth, and would there have been this wonderful blessing resting on his ministry at Corinth if Priscilla and Aquila had never taken him aside in secret?

There were two things Priscilla and Aquila did not do. As soon as they realised there was something wrong with his preaching, they did not start whispering to other people; they spoke to the man himself. And on the other hand, they did not say, All this is none of our business, nothing to do with us; other people can do it better than us; let us leave it.

There is a lot of grace in this chapter. We read of grace in this text I have given you this evening, but there is a lot of grace in this chapter from beginning to end – the grace of God in Apollos in saving him, the grace of God in leading him, the grace of God in using him, the grace of God in moulding him, the grace of God in Priscilla and Aquila in the way they dealt with him, the grace of God in Apollos in falling under it.

Now the mystery of divine sovereignty! It seems very soon after all this he left Ephesus. He had come there; you would think he was going to stay there; you would think he would be a blessing there; you would think he would be useful there. But he went to Achaia, where Corinth is. It was God's purpose that he should be a blessing in Corinth, not in Ephesus. You have the mystery of divine sovereignty.

“And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him.” I just want to linger here a moment. We do not read of any striking leading; we do not read of any special word from the Lord. We read this: “He was disposed” to leave Ephesus and go to Achaia, and the brethren there were completely happy about it. They did not quarrel with him. They wrote to Achaia and recommended him and advised them lovingly to receive him.

I feel constrained to linger on this point a moment. It may be some of you here are seeking the Lord's will. What should you do? What should you not do? Should you move or should you not move? Is this thing right, or is it wrong? It may be that all the leading you will get is this: that you are disposed to go that way, and you are not disposed to go the other way. Let us be clear: as you lay the matter before the Lord, as you beg to be saved from false exercises, as you do not want your own

way, as you really want to go the Lord's way. And we read that "he was disposed to pass into Achaia," and the brethren were happy. They did not try to sort out whether he was wright or wrong. They immediately "wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him."

Just lingering on this point. If you come to the last chapter in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, without going into the detail of it – you can look it up when you go home – Paul badly wanted him to do something, and Paul thought it right, and Paul thought it was according to the will of God, but Paul said that Apollos was not willing at that time to do it, and Paul was completely happy about it; Paul fell under it; Paul was satisfied with it.

I was only reading this last week or two about J.C. Philpot. When he first saw the errors of the Church of England, he began to pray and his great point was, I must see my way clear. He prayed the Lord would show him, should he stay in or should he come out, and he would never move unless the Lord showed him what he should do. Now the Lord never did, but one day it came over him like this: if I were getting drunk every night, would I have to seek a word from the Lord before I stopped being drunk? If I was committing adultery, would I have to seek a word from the Lord before I stopped committing adultery? And he felt in his conscience that so many things he had to do as a minister in the Church of England were dishonouring to God, and that was all the leading he got, and that was the ground on which he came out. I felt constrained to dwell on that point tonight. "When he was disposed to pass into Achaia." And that word at the end of the Corinthians: "As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren: but his will was not at all to come at this time." And Paul was happy with it.

Well, to pass on. "Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace." Then afterwards we find he was made a blessing to those who had *not* believed through grace, those who were enemies, I believe the Jews who denied that Jesus was Christ. He convinced them publicly by the power of the Spirit of God, showing them by the Scriptures that Jesus was Christ.

"Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace." There is a point of doctrine here which we just mention in passing. These believers in Corinth, we are told that the ground upon

which they had become believers was the grace of God. It was not just an act of their will; it was not just a decision. It was *grace* which enabled them to believe on the Son of God to the everlasting salvation of their souls, and it is only grace that can make anyone a believer. It is only grace that can give us faith, only grace that can maintain it, only grace that can bless the preaching to make sinners believers.

“Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace.” Now how did he help them? It seems abundantly clear that the way in which Apollos helped the people of God in Corinth was by preaching the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to them, because we do not read of him helping them in any other way. It was the preaching that helped them. I think you will notice this point – you can follow it through the New Testament. Let me just give you one instance. You remember before Paul came to Philippi, he wondered where he should go, and (just the opposite of Apollos), he had such clear leading. He had a dream, a vision. He saw a man of Macedonia. He could recognise him by his speech; he could recognise him by his dress. He was beckoning, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us.” What does that mean? Paul said, “Assuredly gathering that the Lord had *called us for to preach the gospel* unto them.” And so they went.

In other words, one of the vital things in the preaching of the gospel is to be a help to the people of God. Now may it be that when you come to chapel on the Lord’s day morning and the Lord’s day evening, that the preaching will be a help to you. I remember when I was young at Haslingden, and you would have some of the ministers come. Perhaps it was a good sermon; perhaps it was not; but some of the people would say, Well, what help was it to anybody? The true preaching of the everlasting gospel of the grace of God should be a help to the people of God. “Send us help from the sanctuary” – through the preaching of the Word – “and strengthen us out of Zion.” “Our help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.”

You have things in your home, you have things in your business, you have things with your children, you have things with your troubles, you have things with your life, you have things at work, you have things in your pathway, and you are constantly needing help, and it is nice when people help you, when friends help you. But it is one thing you have the

liberty to seek and expect when you come to the sanctuary in your difficulties and in your problems, that the preaching should be a help to you. May it never be the opposite. May it never be a hindrance to you. We think of the well-known word: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

“Who, when he was come, helped them much.” The Lord blessed them through the preaching of Apollos with grace to help in time of need. May it be that with the preaching here, that as you come with all your burdens and all your concerns, that you find through the preaching under the power of the Holy Spirit grace to help in time of need.

“Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace.” Now dwelling on this point, the preaching of the gospel being a help, the ministry of Apollos being a help, what kind of ministry is it that is going to be a help? What kind of ministry was the ministry of Apollos? We are told clearly that the point in his preaching, it was *a watering of the souls of the people*. The apostle there compares the church of God to a garden with plants of the Father’s right-hand planing, and he says, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.” By the way, that is one of those texts that is often wrongly quoted. How often have you heard it: “Paul may plant, Apollos may water, but God must give the increase.” Well that is true, but that is not what it says. “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.”

“Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace.” So it is clear that there is a different emphasis in the ministry of different people. Paul’s preaching under the Holy Spirit’s divine influence was more for the planting of these believers, planting the truth in their hearts, planting them in Christ, and the work of Apollos was more to water them, but it was *God who gave the increase*.

We think of those two eminent ministers in Scotland* we read about. One preached, and sinner after sinner was cut down under his preaching by the power of the Holy Spirit – the amazing effect of his preaching in the beginning of a work of grace – but one by one they left

* James Fraser and John Porteous

him and went to the other minister, and it was under his preaching that these awakened souls were brought into the sweet liberty of the gospel. They were two friends. The one went to the other and said, "I am sad. All your congregation, as soon as the work of grace is begun in their hearts, come to hear me." His friend said, "Look, I will go on firing the arrows. Let the Lord direct them, and then let the Lord send them to you to pour in the oil and the wine, the balm of Gilead."

So, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." "Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace." It is a wonderful thing if through the preaching the streams of living water flow that spring from eternal love, because the Lord's people come and they long to be refreshed, and sometimes they are weary and they want to be satisfied, and they are thirsty, and sometimes they feel like a withered plant, and sometimes they feel the ground is dry and arid and barren. "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass," through the preaching of Apollos. "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass," and like the dew, the dew upon the tender herb. What is it? The preaching of Christ and Him crucified, that

"The Saviour died, and by His blood
Brought rebel sinners near to God."

What is it? The preaching of the mercy, the love of a once-crucified, now risen Saviour. What is it? The preaching of His tender compassion, His power to save, His promises, His faithfulness, His covenant of grace ordered in all things and sure, when the streams of love and mercy flow from beneath the sacred throne of grace and they flow from Calvary. That is the only channel where they flow.

"All other streams are vain beside
What flows from Calvary."

And they flow as divinely directed by the Holy Spirit, and they flow through the preaching of Apollos, through the preaching of the gospel, and they flow into the hearts of longing sinners, and then the name of Christ is glorified, and then the people are refreshed and blessed and satisfied, and then the church is built up and edified. Now may there be many Apolloses in our churches and may these wonderful blessings be made known here at Bethel.

“I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.”
“Who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace.”