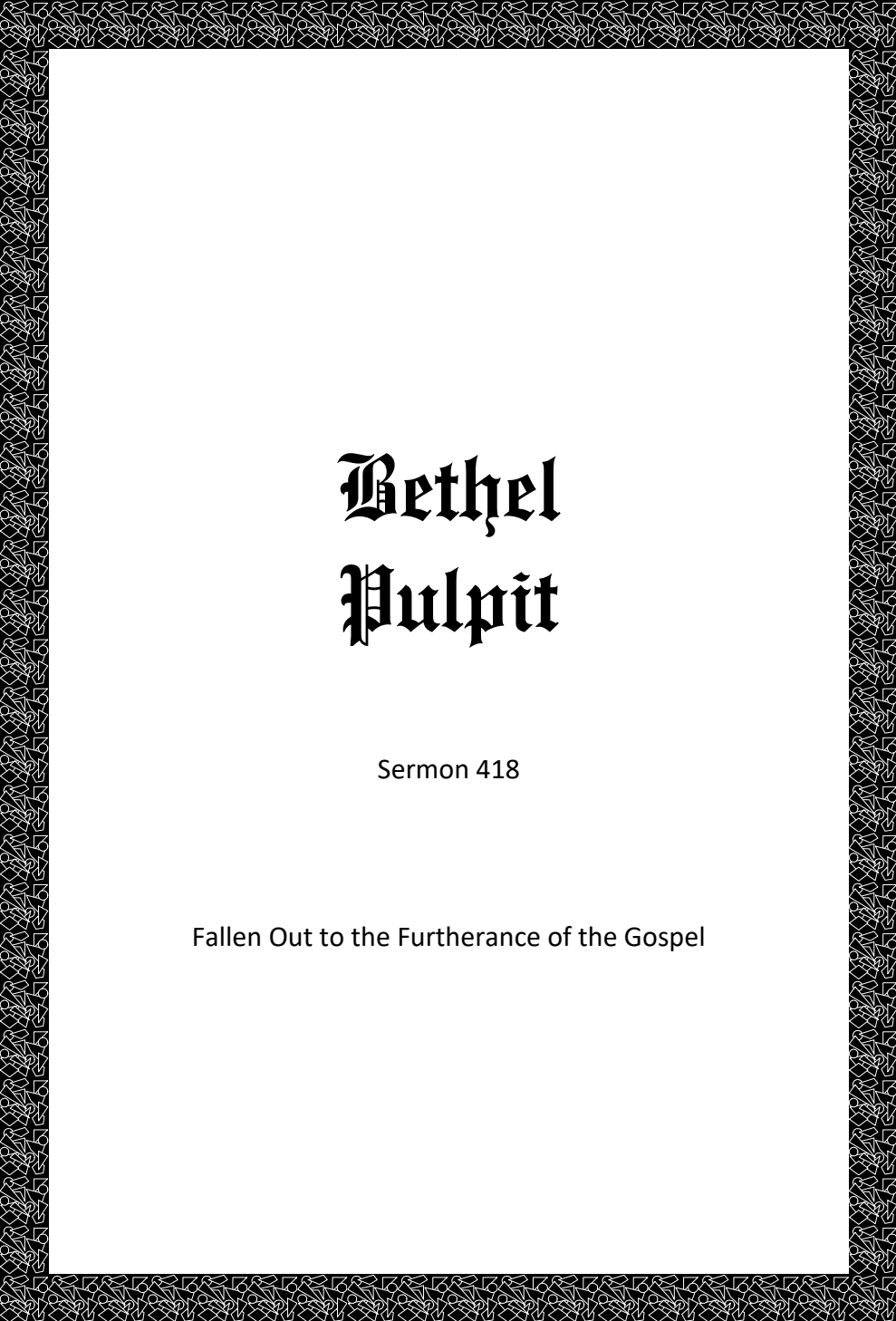




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 418

Fallen Out to the Furtherance of the Gospel

**Sermon preached from his own home by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Easter Sunday evening, 12th April, 2020, when chapels were closed
owing to the coronavirus. The preaching was relayed.**

Text: *“But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel” (Philippians 1. 12).*

Perhaps your immediate thought this evening is, this is not a suitable text for Easter Sunday. Perhaps some of you are thinking it has nothing at all to do with the glorious resurrection of the Saviour from the dead. But just wait a minute, beloved friends. The theme, the interesting theme, the important theme of this verse is *the mystery of divine providence*. That is, nothing happening by chance; everything happening by divine permission; even the great sorrows, even the impossibilities, working together for good, working together for the furtherance of the gospel.

So here really in a miniature we have the glorious truth of divine providence, Almighty God in control, the book of divine providence. Now who holds that book? It is firmly secured in the hands of a risen, exalted Saviour, causing all things to work according to the counsel of His own will, and however strange, however mysterious, making all things – that is, the good and the bad, the sorrows and the joys – making all things work together for good to His beloved people, those who love God, those who are the called according to His purpose.

So we see the book of divine providence here, and we have it in the hands of Christ. What a commentary we have on this in the fifth chapter of the Book of Revelation, when there was none worthy to open the book, to unloose the seals of this book of divine providence, so that even the great apostle wept much. Could no-one open the book? Could no-one unloose the seals? That is, must the unfolding of providence be left to blind chance, or accident; worst of all, to Satan? And then we see the risen Saviour, and what a view we have of Him – a Lamb as it had been slain – and He approaches the throne, and He takes the book, and the book is secured in His hand, and the fulfilment of divine providence, even the mysteries of providence, are all in His hand, and all heaven rejoices.

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” “and hast redeemed us to God by His blood.”

So as we approach this important, but sometimes mysterious subject, we begin with that view of where the book of providence is held: in the hands of a risen, exalted, glorified Saviour. Now the speaker here is the apostle himself. “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” He prays this great blessing, that they might understand the mystery of providence, some of the strange strokes of providence. Because there is a solemn word which says, “None of the wicked shall understand; but the wise *shall* understand.”

Now of course, beloved friends, at the present time we are surrounded by some very solemn, mysterious, strange providences in the coming of this terrible coronavirus, and we need to pray the apostle’s prayer that we might understand. There are many things we do not understand, but may we be helped to pray that these things which have happened might fall out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel. He puts a *rather* upon it. O may we be found amongst those who are blessed with grace to understand, grace to submit, grace to pray, but especially in the spirit of the apostle here, to see in some mysterious way that even these things will work for good, and not only work for good; that they will not prevent the glorious gospel, but rather, in the Saviour’s hands, they will work for the furtherance of the gospel. As we look round and look forward, we cannot altogether see it, but we have to say,

“*When, and where, and by what means,*
To His wisdom leaving,”

because the exalted Saviour has that blessed ability to bring good out of seeming evil, and we feel sure that in some mysterious way, but in His own way, He will accomplish this, that it might be “rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” But, “I would ye should understand, brethren.” O do not come quickly to conclusions. Do not misunderstand it. Do not have false thoughts, unscriptural thoughts. All these things, even this terrible virus, these things so sad, so solemn that are taking place at present, they are all in the hands of the risen, exalted Saviour. The book is in His hand.

“But I would ye should understand, brethren.” Many years ago, there was a girl given a book for a present, and she looked at it. She did

not like it. She could not understand it. So she did not even bother reading much of it. She just put it away on a shelf. But some time later, she was on holiday and she met a most charming gentleman, and she spent quite a bit of time with him. She was most interested in him and in his conversation. To her amazement, she found he was the author of that book she could not understand. So I think you know what she did: as soon as she got home, the book was taken down from the shelf. Had she ever read such an interesting book! She could understand it. Now what was the difference? *She had read the book, but now she knew the author.* That is the vital point this evening, and really it is the vital point in real religion, and it is the vital point in understanding the things of God and the mystery of providence. We might have the book, we might know the book, we might read the book – but O to be blessed with that vital, experimental knowledge of the Author, whom to know is life eternal.

“But I would ye should understand, brethren” – I would that ye *should* understand – “that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” Now things do not just happen. They *do* happen, but they do not *just* happen; they do not only happen. Whether they are joys or sorrows, whether they are good things or bad things, the apostle tells us here, *they fall out*. Where do they fall out from? They fall out from the lap of divine providence. All these things happening at present, they have not taken the Lord by surprise. They have *fallen out*. “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.” “I would ye should understand” this. May we as a congregation understand it, to see where these things are falling out from. It is not Satan in control; it is not blind chance. “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.”

So, “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out,” and they have “fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” Now let us just pause here and think of these things concerning the church at Philippi, the ministry of the Apostle Paul, his imprisonment at Rome, and how these things were falling out. So we cannot help but go back to the apostle’s first visit to Philippi. That was certainly a falling out, and it was a falling out for the furtherance of the gospel. It was the first time the gospel was ever preached in Europe. But it seemed Paul had no real desire to cross into Europe or to visit Philippi. He tells us how he thought of going to one place, and the Lord forbade

him. He assayed to go into another; the Spirit did not permit it. It seems he was at a standstill. And then he had that remarkable vision, the man of Macedonia crying, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us.”

Now there was a *clear* falling out of divine providence there, a very *clear* falling out. So you see the mystery of it. As you read Acts chapter 16, when Paul reached Philippi, he says, “We were in that city abiding certain days,” which in other words implies that nothing was happening. There was this remarkable revelation, and nothing happening. You find that some-times.

“He hides the purpose of His grace,
To make it better known.”

And in our little lives, sometimes we are most clearly led in a pathway, and then either nothing seems to happen, or if things do happen, then things seem to be going wrong.

And then there were those women meeting for prayer by the river side, and this was the opening of the gospel in Europe. How many millions of sinners since that day have been blessed in once-favoured Europe! “A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple ... whose heart the Lord opened.” It is the providence of God; it is the Spirit of God working.

But then you see, that terrible trouble. Is it everything going wrong? Are they going to be disappointed? I am sure Paul could not understand it – cast into prison, cruelly beaten – and there the wonders of free grace were performed in the everlasting salvation of the Philippian jailor.

In a remarkable way the Philippians had already understood this. They had proved it in Paul’s first visit to Philippi, that the things that happened unto him fell out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.

So there is a little church at Philippi now. It was a favoured church. It was a church that Paul dearly loved. But it seems they could not understand that no longer could he visit them; no longer could he visit the churches. He was in Rome; he was in prison. It seemed like the end of his usefulness. It seemed that the furtherance of the gospel in Paul’s ministry was ended, and perhaps ended for ever. No, says the apostle. It is not like

that at all. “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel,” not the prohibition of the gospel. O may it be like that with us in our country and through the world at present – not for the prohibition of the gospel. It is the prohibition of meeting in our chapels, but may it not be for the prohibition of the gospel. In the Lord’s own way, may it be for the furtherance of the gospel.

But how was this coming to pass? In two different ways. First of all, there were those in Rome, those even in Caesar’s palace, and Paul was able to speak to them. Though a prisoner, he was allowed a certain amount of liberty, and the gospel was reaching a place where it could never otherwise have reached, and there were some there whose names were hidden away in the Lamb’s book of life. But the appointed time had come, as it must do with all the Lord’s chosen, “not to propose, but call by grace.” So these things that had happened – Paul in prison in Rome – had “fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” God does work in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. But beloved friends, it is not mysterious to Him.

“Fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” But the second way: Paul could no longer travel and visit the churches, but what was happening – he was writing those wonderful epistles, led by the Spirit of God, which are still being made a blessing to the very ends of the earth, and they will continue to be so as long as time endures. So the gospel has been furthered more through Paul’s writings when he was shut up in prison in Rome, than all his preaching when he was free and able to visit the churches. That is the mystery of divine providence. God Almighty makes no mistakes.

I keep thinking of the situation we are in at present, the strange things that are happening, some being shut up in their own homes, not allowed to go through the door, some who are very unwell through this virus. We read of one or two eminent, godly men, known for their godliness and grace, who have succumbed to this virus and who have died. Unbelief says, “Why, Lord?” But these things have happened, “fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” You and I may think this and that and something else, but the Lord’s *rather* cancels all these things out. He has something better to tell us. He has better reasons. He has a better

explanation. It is the Lord's *rather* which matters, not our thoughts, which are sometimes foolish.

"Fallen out *rather* unto the furtherance of the gospel." So we cannot help but think of John Bunyan. What a good minister he was, and what a blessing he was made in Bedfordshire and in other places. Then he was cruelly thrown into prison in Bedford jail for twelve years. What is it? God's purpose being overthrown? The Lord's people were bitterly disappointed. Why should those things be? We look back now, and we see that those things that happened to John Bunyan in his cruel imprisonment fell out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel. We need only to think of his *Pilgrim's Progress*, and what a blessing that has been made, written while he was confined from preaching, confined in jail. But it was not just the *Pilgrim's Progress*, sacred book as that is, but the many works that he wrote, filling three large volumes, able to do it because of his time of solitary confinement and imprisonment. He still had pen, ink and paper, and to think that three hundred years and more after his death, people not only in Bedford, not only in England, but throughout the whole world are still delighted to read Bunyan's writings, and not only to read them, but here and there to be blessed by them.

So, "I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me" – unto Paul – "have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." But beloved friends, over and above it all, in the sufferings and the death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, it seemed that Satan had triumphed. Who can understand the dreadful feelings of the Lord's immediate disciples and His friends in that solemn day between the first Good Friday and the first Easter Sunday? Had they been mistaken? Had they been deceived? Had their Lord failed? What if He had failed? O the disappointment there was! But more than that: if He had failed, what of their hope, their sins, their souls, eternity?

"Now is Christ risen from the dead." The things that had happened were solemn things, but we have to say about them, as Joseph did to his brethren, "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good" – to everlasting good! O the things that happened! You think of the suffering at the hand of Pontius Pilate, the high priest Caiaphas, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Romans – the bitter hatred, the cruel persecution, the scourging, the mocking, and then at last that cruel murder. I am sure that

many of you this evening understand, and blessedly understand, and gloriously understand, that these things that happened in the hall Gabbatha, that happened at Calvary, have eternally fallen out, not just to the extent of the gospel; the beginning of the gospel, the continuing of the gospel. There would not be any gospel without them. So we see this beautiful word in all its fulness fulfilled in the sin-atonement sufferings and then the triumph of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. May we see it today when we think of His glorious resurrection.

“I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel” – not just to the preaching of the gospel, and the success of the gospel, but the blessing of the gospel in the hearts of God’s people. How many over the years have walked this out in providence! How the old magazines are full of the little stories of how wicked men meant something for evil, but it fell out rather for good!

I am sure with some of you, perhaps many of you listening this evening, there have been times in your life when you have had a bitter disappointment, when you have had a deep sorrow, and the Lord has overruled it all for His glory and your good – if you will, the furtherance of the gospel in your soul. You have proved that disappointment is God’s appointment. “God meant it unto good.” That sorrow, that affliction – “God having provided some better thing for you.” That thing you felt you could never part with, you could never give up – O the bitterness of it. “He taketh away the first, that He may establish the second.” And these things in our little lives, as we look back, and they have fallen out for good, to the furtherance of the gospel. How we long, and how we would pray, that at this time, with all these things which are happening – and you can fill in your own little piece here – “*the things which have happened unto me*” – you can fill your own little piece in there, but may you be helped to pray that these things shall fall out for your good, for the Lord’s glory, for the furtherance of the gospel.

You have heard me tell that story of Bishop Taylor Smith, but it bears repeating. He was a godly man, well-known in high circles, highly esteemed. In the first World War he was Bishop to all his Majesty’s forces. One day after the war he was on a very important journey. It was very important he was there on time. But he had to change trains, and the second train he was hoping to travel on had left, and he was upset, and he

was angry, and he was confused, and he could not understand it, because it was in the Lord's service and it was important. And then it came to him: perhaps the Lord had some purpose in it. He prayed it might be so. Not knowing what to do, he left the station, went for a walk, went into a park and sat down. At the other end of the seat was a poor man, obviously in distress. He was groaning. The kind bishop went to him and asked if he could help. The man would not even look at him. He said, "There is only one person on earth who could help me. It is that bishop who visited us when we were in the forces. What he said to me – I think he was called Taylor Smith – if only I could see him!" The bishop said, "My friend, I am he! Now then, how can I help you?" So the thing that happened fell out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel. That is how I remember the story.

The old preachers, if you remember, often used to speak of it like the weaving of a carpet, all the different strands being put together, some gold, some crimson, some black. But the story was told that the old Persian carpets were literally made in Persia. It seemed there was some kind of platform where the person in charge directed what had to be done. Underneath were various workmen, and at his direction one put in a golden thread here, and another would put in a black thread, and all the different colours. To those underneath, looking up, it just seemed nothing but confusion. But when the carpet was finished – not till then – they were allowed to come up on the platform, and looking down they could see a perfect carpet. It was the work of their hands; it had affected them; they could not make sense of it; it seemed confusion. But now they could see that everything was right, everything in its right place. And the old preachers used to talk of Almighty God as being that Weaver, accomplishing His purposes, sometimes mysterious to us below, but, "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter."

Some of you may know the little old poem:

"Not till the loom is silent,
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas,
And explain the reason why.

"The dark threads are as needful,
In the Weaver's skilful hand,

As the threads of gold and silver,
In the pattern He has planned.”

“But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.”