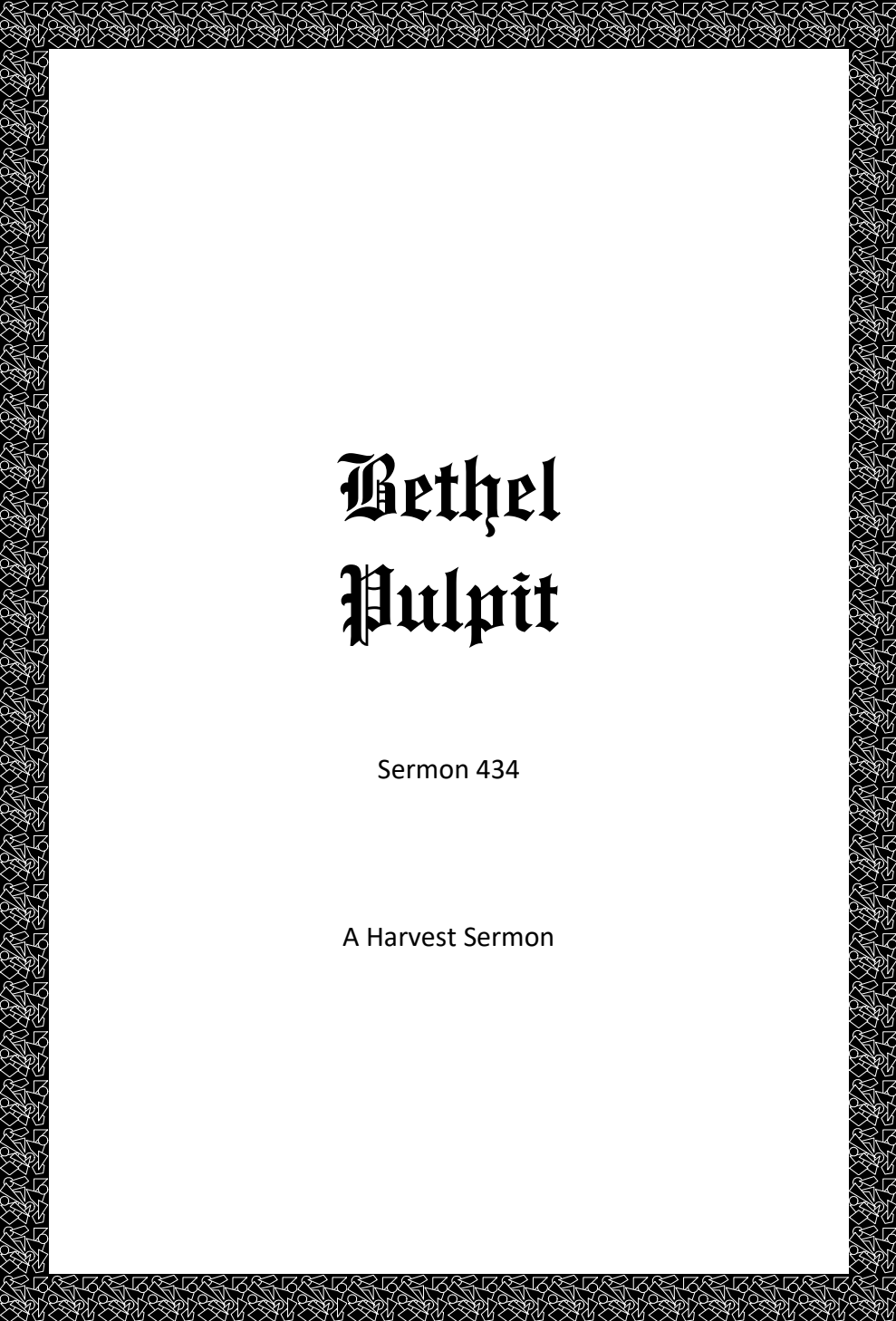




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 434

A Harvest Sermon

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 11th October, 2020**

Text: *"Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow" (Mark 4. 3).*

One of the great themes of the Word of God is thanksgiving. The sad thing is that all of us come so far short in it. But right through the Word of God we have the exhortation to be thankful to the Lord for all His mercies. Of course, you have it especially in the Book of the Psalms, but also, amongst those exhortations concerning thankfulness, there is quite a lot of mention of the harvest – the need to be thankful for it, and also the significance of it in a spiritual sense.

Let me just remind you of one special place in the Psalms, the thanksgiving for the harvest. "Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: Thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water: Thou preparest them corn, when Thou hast so provided for it. Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly: Thou settlest the furrows thereof: Thou makest it soft with showers: Thou blessest the springing thereof. Thou crownest the year with Thy goodness; and Thy paths drop fatness. They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness: and the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing."

But I am sure one thing some of you must have noticed: that so often when the Word of God is speaking of joy, the example is constantly given: they joy as the joy in harvest. We think of that lovely little word: "There be many that say, Who will shew us any good?" Well, some people know what it is. "Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart, *more* than in the time that their corn and their wine increased."

So there is so much in the Word of God about thanksgiving, about the harvest, and of course the reason was that in ancient Israel and in New Testament times, it was an agricultural people. Most of them were living close to the soil. Our Lord Jesus especially spoke of the harvest – the sowing, the reaping – and the importance of these truths to us spiritually.

Now this is the first of the Lord's parables. I do not know about you girls and boys, but when we were young, at day school we were taught that "a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Well that is just it! This is the first parable that the Lord Jesus spoke, and also it is the parable where at

the end He explains just what the spiritual significance of it all is. You notice our Lord Jesus was continually using examples from everything round about. Many have wondered if when the Lord Jesus spoke this parable, He could actually see a sower, or on the other hand, He could actually see a harvest field.

“Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow.” Clearly did our Lord Jesus teach; there is nothing complicated here. To His hearers it was abundantly plain, all these things He was talking about. In a natural sense every one of them must have witnessed it. Of course, you all understand it was the old-fashioned, Biblical way of sowing. There was not anything like what we read of in the eighteenth century when Jethro Tull invented his seed drill and things like that. They used to broadcast the seed. That is where we get our word *broadcast* from. They had a basket of seed, and as they went about they just flung it out, some on the left hand and some on the right hand.

This parable speaks of the four different places where the seed fell. The “sower went forth to sow.” There was nothing at all wrong with the sower, and nothing wrong with the seed; it was good seed. But the difference was the ground. Now the sower sowing the seed of God’s Word – our Lord Jesus made it clear at the end, the seed is God’s Word. So when a minister preaches the everlasting gospel, whatever kind of hearers he has, there is a different effect, and we need to be so concerned about what effect the preaching of the gospel might have. That is what we mean when so often on the Lord’s day we pray that our hearts might be prepared, our hearts prepared to receive the Word of God, like the good ground at the end of the parable. It was prepared; it was ready; it received the Word; the seed entered in; the seed took root; the seed brought forth fruit.

It is a very solemn parable, because there are four kinds of ground, four kinds of hearers, but it was only one that was really fruitful. And so one of the most awful things is to be a gospel hearer all the days of our life, and the Word never really to have a good and gracious effect. It is no wonder the Lord Jesus said, “Take heed ... *how ye hear.*” But you also notice later on in the chapter, the Lord Jesus said, “Take heed *what ye hear.*” It could also be said, Take heed what ye read. I hope we do not have them at Bethel, but I remember when I was young, quite a lot of people were always wanting to hear something different from what there was at their own chapel. “Have you heard of this man in the district? You ought to go and hear him. We think he might be a good man.” Now the Lord said, “Take heed ... *how ye hear.*” And He also said, “Take heed *what ye hear.*”

“Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow.” I would just say this, that in its fullest sense, the sower is the preacher of the gospel. In a lesser sense, but still an important sense, it is our Sunday school teachers. They too when they are teaching – well, there are so many things, but it is sowing the good seed. In ancient days, a godly farmer prayed that that good seed he had sown might have a good effect. Our Sunday school teachers, there is that wonderful privilege, but also the responsibility, but the privilege of prayer.

I will just mention the mothers in our congregation, and really the fathers too – bringing up children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Do not forget it is a sowing. The things you say, it is a sowing. Do not forget that sowing in prayer. But do not forget that sowing of your example. “In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.”

“Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow.” Now let us just look at the four different kinds of ground. The first: “And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.” It was just as if you went out and you were throwing some peas about, and they had just been bouncing up in the air. They did not penetrate at all. That is the kind of hearer who is not interested, who does not listen. The Word of God does not have any real effect whatsoever.

The Lord Jesus told us who these birds of the air are that catch at the seed. He said it was Satan. That is a very close truth. It means that when we are preaching, Satan is listening, even if some people are not. Satan is listening, and he is not present to do any good, but he is trying to stop the Word of God being profitable in any way. It says, as soon as the sower has thrown this seed out, Satan is there to snatch it away. Now that is a solemn thing.

But we do hear some remarkable things at times. Some years ago, there was a boy. He did not like going to chapel. He only went because his father made him, and he so hated the truth that he literally, as soon as the minister began to preach, put his fingers in his ears so that he could not hear a single word. But the Lord had a purpose of mercy to him, and one day a wasp came and stung him on his hand. Well, his fingers came out of his ears and he heard something. It was not much, but it was sufficient. It did the deed.

Of course, there was that remarkable case with J.C. Philpot’s preaching. He had a young lady who was stone deaf. She could never hear a word, but just on one occasion for some reason she heard a sentence, and that

one sentence did the deed. It was the beginning of a good work. May the Lord save us from being stony ground hearers. But if you feel you have a stony heart, there is a beautiful promise of how the Lord can take away the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11. 19).

And then the second hearers. The other was nothing but stone; this is just stony ground. There was just a thin layer of earth over it, but there was no depth. “Some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: but when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.” This is sad. I have been witness of it many times. We have been witnesses of it at Bethel. We have seen some, and what delight it has been to us, with what joy they have received the Word, even being baptized, joining the church at Bethel, and beloved friends, *where are they today?* May the Lord deliver us from that.

There were two things that the Lord Jesus emphasised about the stony ground hearers. They did not endure. That was the exact word He used. “Endure but for a time.” I think it was the great Jonathan Edwards, speaking of what were the real marks and evidences of grace – and do not forget it was Jonathan Edwards out in America who had more blessing than anyone else – and he said the one only definite mark of grace as he was watching in his hearers was this: that if it was real, it endured. Many seemed to have everything else, but they did not endure. O don’t we have to pray that little hymn that I like so much:

“Lord, hast Thou made me know Thy ways?
Conduct me in Thy fear;
And grant me such supplies of grace,
That I may persevere.”

The Lord Jesus said, “He that endureth to the end shall be saved.” We know every real child of God, chosen, redeemed by blood, sanctified, will, must endure to the end; but it is only their enduring to the end that proves them to be a chosen, redeemed, sanctified soul.

The second thing the Lord Jesus emphasised about these stony ground hearers: they had no root. There was a springing up, there was some appearance, it seemed as if there was life, but there was no root, and “because it had no root, it withered away.” Now beloved friends, in real religion the vital thing is to have good roots. The roots are vital. You cannot see them; they are out of sight. You cannot hear them growing. It is that secret, silent, vital work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that matters, not what people can

see or hear. What does the Lord say? They “take root downward, and bear fruit upward.” “Because it had no root, it withered away.” The root fastens and fixes the plant in the soil. The other thing: the roots derive from the soil all that the living plant needs to keep that living plant alive.

Then we come to the third group of hearers. “And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.” You will find most of the godly commentators speak of this third class of hearers just as the first two. Now I have pondered this for a long time. I am not so sure; it seems a little bit different. There is nothing wrong with the soil here, and the seed entered into the soil and began to grow, and it seemed to be having a good growth, but then it was spoilt by these thorns and brambles. But what I have thought about so much is, it did seem to take root, and Luke in his gospel puts it rather differently from Matthew and Mark. He said it “brought no fruit to perfection.” That is how Luke puts it: “no fruit to perfection,” which implies a very disappointing harvest, that it was a bad harvest, it did not do very well at all. But it seems there was some fruit, but there was not fruit brought to perfection. But we leave that. It was a sad case, and the Lord knows whether there was any reality there or not.

It was only, I think, this morning, pondering on this, it seemed like Lot. You remember Lot when he was in Sodom and Gomorrah. Poor Lot did not seem to do any good. He made a bad choice. He had mingled with sinners. He sat in the gate with them. He did escape, but he lost his home, he lost his wife, he lost his sons-in-law, he lost his daughters, he lost his possessions, he lost everything. When you read through the life of Lot in the Book of Genesis, you feel sorrow. You think Abraham’s nephew is a lost character, and then to your amazement, in the epistles, “that righteous man” (2 Peter 2. 8) grieving his righteous soul because of “their unlawful deeds.” We have to come back to this, beloved friends: it is only the Lord who really knows; and the Lord knew that amidst all these things with Lot, all this disappointment to Abraham, the root of the matter was found in him. It seems to me that perhaps Lot was like one of these, the growth being spoiled by the thorns and the brambles.

But here there comes a great warning to us all, because the Lord Jesus clearly tells us what the thorns and the brambles were. He said that some were the cares of this life, some were the deceitfulness of riches, some were sinful pleasures. It did not matter which they were; they just stifled the growth. Really they strangled it, so there could not be much fruit. What a clear warning there is here.

It seems to me that those different kinds of briars and brambles, some are more trials for old people, and some in the middle of life, and some for young people. Young people are not much tempted by riches – they have not got any – and not much tempted with the cares of this life; but sinful pleasures – how Satan uses that. And then it is people in the middle of life who are so concerned about wanting to get on, wanting to prosper and all these things – bigger and better cars, and better and better holidays, and bigger and better houses, and so on. And then it is old people – all these cares of this life that come. It is a sad thing – you sometimes find a dear, godly child of God, and in old age their infirmities are so intense, it almost seems to stifle everything, and especially if their minds begin to waver. There was one old man came into Bethesda about thirty or forty years ago. I thought he was one of the loveliest characters I had ever come across. Well, they had nothing but trouble with him in the Home. They had to put him in a room by himself all the time. You could not have three more different things: sinful pleasures, earthly riches, cares.

So we come to the fourth one: the good ground. “And other fell on good ground.” That means the seed entered in. It took root downward, and then at harvest time, it was bringing up a crop. By nature our hearts are stony ground. It is the Holy Spirit’s work to prepare a sinner’s heart to receive the Word of God. It is a wonderful thing if the Lord is making our hearts tender, receptive of the truth, the truth entering in. What did we read later on? It was a different parable, “As if a man should cast seed into the ground” (verse 26). Now some of those hearers at the beginning did not get any good ground. There seems an emphasis here: the seed went into the ground, that the seed should spring and grow up.

“For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.” The Lord’s work is gradual. You need to beware if you hear a young person talking as if he is eighty years old. How often we have seen it. It has come to nothing. “First the blade.” But just pausing here. How many a young believer has looked at an aged saint and been so cast down, so troubled: I am not like that. Well, of course you are not like that. That is the full corn in the ear. You are just the blade. But there is an order. “First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.”

I like that word: coming to the grave like a shock of corn fully ripe (Job 5. 26). The wind blows, the rain falls, there is the sun, there is summer, there is winter. All three things are needed. A shock of corn fully ripe. But this seed is bringing forth fruit. You know the kind of thing: repentance, faith, the tender fear of God, love, a good hope through grace, gratitude, a tender

walk, a good profession, gracious conversation – all these things. In John chapter 15: “Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit.” It is a solemn thing, the barrenness of our hearts so often we have to deplore.

So it is a wonderful thing, and there is sure to be a harvest. The ancient promise made to Noah – there is sure to be a harvest. This is an encouraging word for preachers, and Sunday school teachers, and parents. In the early days of my pastorate, I was a little bit cast down. The preaching did not seem to be having much effect. I was preaching down in Sussex and I had Mr. Stanley Delves in my congregation. But I had heard he was a very wise man, and I told him that I was a little bit troubled: I preached, and I did not know what was the matter, but there did not seem to be much effect. He seemed to sit quietly with his eyes closed and his head down for a moment or two. Then he said, “You are covered on it. ‘In due season you shall reap, if you faint not.’” So there is the promise: “They that sow in tears *shall* reap in joy.”

This is just a little bit troublesome to me. They were all fruitful. Some were thirty fold, and some were three times as much fruitful: they were a hundred fold. I think we have witnessed it in our lives. You have seen some people and they seem to be bringing forth fruit a hundred fold. Perhaps you see others and you cannot understand why, but there is something amiss somehow, somewhere. It is only thirty fold. O but may the Lord in His mercy make us truly fruitful and according to His will, whatever the measure, to bring forth fruit to eternal life.

There is only one other thing. I am going to be very short on it. “Behold, there went out a sower to sow.” It says, “*Hearken.*” Now since I came to live in Luton, I do not think I have heard people use this word very much, but in the wilds of Lancashire it was a very often-used word, especially a mother to her children: You are not hearkening; will you please hearken. They meant something a little bit more than listen. They meant listen very intently, listen because it is something that matters, listen because it is important. “Hearken.”

Well, these have been solemn things this morning. I hope you have all been listening, but more than that, I hope you have been hearkening, and may the Lord bless this word to you. “Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow.”