

Bethel

Pulpit

Christ our Sanctuary

Sermon Number 479

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 22nd July, 2018**

Text: *"Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come" (Ezekiel 11. 16).*

We have this word *sanctuary* many times in the Word of God in the Old Testament. On almost every occasion to God's ancient people it meant one thing: the tabernacle, and then later the temple at Jerusalem. To God's ancient people, if you were to speak to them about the sanctuary, that is where their thoughts would run.

Now at the time when Ezekiel wrote this prophecy, there had been that terrible captivity, a great number of God's ancient people taken into captivity in Babylon. It is made clear from this chapter that most of the godliness, most of the grace, was not with those who still had the temple in Jerusalem. There was a lot of wickedness there. There was a lot of formality there. Most of the godliness and grace was in the remnant, those who were exiles. Now there was much formality and there was much wickedness with those who remained in Jerusalem. Well, their very language was, "The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these." As long as they had that beautiful sanctuary, they thought they were safe, they thought that no harm could come to them, and they really despised the exiles. They thought the exiles no longer had any religion. They thought God had forsaken them. They thought they were far off, and the great thing was this: they thought these poor exiles they despised so much were separate from the sanctuary.

And then the Lord spoke this very kind and very beautiful word, and it is a promise: "Thus saith the Lord." It is Almighty God's own word. "Thus saith the Lord God; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come." So the way the Lord looked on these things was very different from the way men looked at them. The Lord said, "Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary." Back in Jerusalem they had a big sanctuary, but it had been forsaken by God. Soon it was destroyed.

O but this godly remnant! Ezekiel was one of them, Daniel was one of them at this time, and the Lord was to be to them a little sanctuary, in both senses, in two senses. This word *sanctuary* in common parlance today can be used in two different ways. First of all, a holy, sacred place, a place where the Lord's presence is to be found, a place where His blessing is to be made known, and the remnant in Babylon were to prove this, which those who had the temple in Jerusalem were not proving because of their sin. But the Lord's gracious presence with His people, and the help He gave them, and how they were enabled to worship Him, how they were helped to follow Him.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary.” Of course, the second meaning which has developed of the word *sanctuary*, is a place of refuge. Well, in this country up till fairly recent times there was a law which gave the right of sanctuary. There were some churches still under that ancient law, that if someone fled and hid in one of those churches, no-one was allowed to touch them. When I used to visit the city of Beverley, a beautiful city with a beautiful minster, there were some kinds of ancient markings in a circle round the centre of that town, and they were all a mile from the minster, and a person seeking sanctuary had not just to find and enter Beverley minster, but if he got within a mile of it, the arm of the law could not touch him. It would be interesting to know if there are any places in England where that ancient custom prevails today. I think they were given a certain amount of time there before they could be brought forth and given a fair trial. We have a similar thing in the Old Testament with Joab where they tried to slay him, and he sought refuge in the sanctuary. We are told he laid hold on the horns of the altar.

So the Lord was going to be a sanctuary to His people – His gracious presence, His love and mercy – but also He was going to be a refuge to them. They were going to have many difficulties, many trials. It would not be easy. It was especially hard, living among those heathen people, but the Lord was going to be a little sanctuary to them, to guard them and to protect them.

Let me give you two immediate instances actually concerning the exiles in Babylon. One: the three Hebrew children. They were literally cast by the cruel monarch into the flames, and what did they prove? That the Lord would be a little sanctuary to them there. The fires could not burn them, except for burning their bonds. And the other: of course, Daniel. He

was thrown into the lions' den. What did he prove? That his God was a little sanctuary to him there.

Now this beautiful promise did not expire at the end of seventy years when the Lord's people were permitted to return to Jerusalem. It is still true today, and it is still being fulfilled spiritually in the lives of the Lord's people. It is a yea and amen promise. Some of you have proved it. Some of these at Bethel who have now gone home to glory proved it, and some of you will still prove it, that the Lord will be to you a little sanctuary in all places wherever you come.

Of course, this word reminds us of that promise made to Jacob when he had to flee from his home, from the wrath of his elder brother, Esau, and when he lay down at a place he called Bethel with a stone for his pillow. He found Bethel that night to be a little sanctuary to him, both ways. He never found a more sacred spot than Bethel. Jacob never forgot Bethel. He spoke of it when he was dying. You will have your spots and places which you can never forget.

“Dost mind the place, the spot of ground,
Where Jesus did thee meet?”

Could you take us to some of those spots and say, “He blessed me there”? The Lord was his defence.

But the point I am making at present is that in a sense the promise that Almighty God gave to Jacob at Bethel was similar to this promise: “Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.” What did God say to Jacob? “Behold, I am with thee.” He proved it that night. He proved the Lord a little sanctuary to him that night. This is it. This is the relevance between Genesis and Ezekiel. “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in *all places* whither thou goest.” Jacob did not know then some of those strange places into which he would come. He came into some terrible places. You have only to think of when he lost his beloved Joseph. You have only to think of when he said, “Ye shall bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.” But when you read the life of Jacob, all the way through from first to last, the Lord was a little sanctuary to him, and not only despite the greatness of his sorrows and troubles, but he was always blundering, making mistakes, scheming, sinning, and despite that, because grace abounds and because grace is in the promise, “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in *all places* whither thou goest.”

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.” The simple meaning of this verse in a godly sense is this: that the Lord will be with His people at all times and in all places, to favour them with His presence, and to grant them His divine help, and as a sovereign Protector, “unseen, yet for ever at hand.” It does not matter what the place is. It does not need to be a chapel. It does not matter where God’s people are found. The Lord is able and willing to be as a little sanctuary to them there, and He has promised that He will.

There was one occasion when some of us powerfully felt this word. Years ago in the summer holidays, a lot of us, many from our congregation here, used to go on holiday to the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales and were joined by many other people. We hired a village hall in Abersoch, because there seemed to be little truth in that part of the world, and if there was, they did not speak English; they only spoke Welsh. Now this was our first visit there, and there was quite a large gathering, but the village hall in Abersoch seemed like the devil’s ground, like a den of thieves. There had been a dance there till after midnight the evening before. There were all kinds of placards and things all over the place. If ever I felt a hymn and it was this – it is the very essence of this promise – “Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary:

“Jesus, *where ’er* Thy people meet” – even if it is a dance hall –
“Jesus, *where ’er* Thy people meet,
There they behold Thy mercy-seat;
Where ’er they seek Thee Thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.”

A little sanctuary in all places, whatever that place is.

Remarkably, quite a lot of the godly, especially in former years at Bethel, when they have been taken into hospital, they have been really favoured to find their hospital bed to be a little sanctuary. They knew that other word that Ezekiel spoke: Jehovah-shammah – “The Lord is there.” Now some of you may have to go into hospital. You do not know what you might have in the hospital, and perhaps some of you might fear it, tremble because of it, but if the Lord goes with you, and you pray that He will, you may find your visit to that hospital to be a little sanctuary to you.

There are so many aspects of this. Incidentally, the old, godly Puritan writers were living at the time the Pilgrim Fathers left England

because they were persecuted severely here, and they went to America. They said how the Pilgrim Fathers had actually proved this, that the Lord would be to them a little sanctuary in the country where they should come. It was a strange country to them. It was an unknown country to them. They were fleeing from England because of persecution. O the blessing those Pilgrim Fathers found when they landed! They truly proved this, that their God, the God they had known in England, had not forsaken them. He was a little sanctuary to them there.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.” It does not matter what the place is where you come. I think perhaps the strangest place anyone – any child of God – had to come – I wonder what you would say? I am thinking of Jonah swallowed by a whale, in the whale’s belly. Would you believe it? – he found a little sanctuary there. The Lord leads His people. He has made promises to them. They are covenant promises. He is faithful to them. It does not matter where they are found.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary.” I could not help but think of the numbers who this weekend have gone on holiday, and those of you who during these coming weeks hope to go away on holiday. We hope and pray that this promise will be proved with you, that the Lord will be a little sanctuary to you, both ways: that you might feel His presence with you, be able to worship Him, but also in your journeyings, especially if you have difficulties and dangers, that the Lord will be that little sanctuary, protecting you, defending you.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.” I have also thought of you children, and the older children and young people. The holidays are coming, but afterwards you are returning to school, or perhaps you are leaving school and going to college, going to nursing, going to work. Perhaps you are going into a different class. Perhaps some of you timid ones are rather fearful about it. Some of us really remember what it used to be, starting a new school, or going to a new class. Pray for this, that the Lord Jesus Himself, when you come there, whoever you are, wherever it is, pray that He will be a little sanctuary to you, that He will be with you and that He will be round about you, that He will keep you, and He will guide you, and He will defend you, whatever difficulties you might have.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.” Now we do not know what places we have to come into. One of you might have something before you next week, or in the coming weeks, and you shrink from it. Some people have disappointments. Some people have bereavements. That one they loved so much and trusted so much is no longer with them. How are they going to manage? How are they going to carry on? The Lord says, “Yet will I be ... a little sanctuary,” never to leave you nor forsake you.

How many people are troubled about the unknown way. O but beloved friends, when we think of the unknown way, especially what about the end of it? “How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan,” when time is no more, when you draw your last breath, when you are issued into a never-ending eternity? Do you ever tremble about these things? So many of the Lord’s people, some of them have been fearful all their life long, but *when they come there* – not before – when they come there, they prove that that God in whom they have hoped has not left them. He has not forgotten them. He is a little sanctuary to them. So they can walk that out:

“O that in Jordan’s swelling
I may be helped to sing,
And pass the river, telling
The triumphs of my King.”

It does not matter what the place is. Take it spiritually. What did David say? “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” He might have said, Thou wilt be as a little sanctuary to me, but he said the same in spirit: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me.” That blessing of the little sanctuary, if you have it, if you know it, if you are in it, then you fear no evil, for the Lord is with you.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.” Well, if I had the ability, we could go on all morning about all these spots and places and things into which the Lord’s people come. Some you fear, but O the wonder of this promise!

Now I have almost spoken this morning as if the Lord in His great love and mercy will *provide* a little sanctuary for them. Well, He will; but that is not what He says here. He says, “*I*,” that is the Lord Jesus Himself.

“Yet will *I* be to them as a little sanctuary.” It is Almighty God. It is the One who is faithful, the One who can be trusted. It is the One who loves with an everlasting love. It is the One who in wisdom understands your case. It is the One who in the tenderness of His loving sympathy understands, and He cares, and He will provide. The emphasis is on a Person, on a glorious Person. “Be content with such things as ye have: for *He* hath said, *I* will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,” how ever great the trouble, and how ever great your unworthiness and your sin.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.” Now let our last thoughts this morning be of what I count a lovely subject: *Christ our sanctuary*. May some of you find that echo in your very hearts:

“Beloved Saviour, ever be
A Sanctuary unto me.”

It is the Lord Jesus. It is His presence that we want. We want Him to be with us, to lead us, to guide us, to direct our steps. O but we want Him to be that little sanctuary to us in that sense of the refuge. We need a refuge. We have sinned against a holy God. One day we will have to give an account. We need a hiding place. Israel on the Passover night – didn’t they need a sanctuary! And wasn’t the Lord a blessed sanctuary to them as they sheltered beneath the blood shed, the blood sprinkled! Now that is our sanctuary as sinners, our sanctuary for the great day – the precious blood of Jesus, finding a hiding place in the sanctuary.

And then especially there was an emphasis: there were the places of refuge in the Old Testament where the manslayer could flee and be safe. How beautifully does John Kent open it up:

“A refuge for sinners the gospel makes known;
’Tis found in the merits of Jesus alone.”

There is your little sanctuary, beloved friends. But a refuge speaks of one or two things. It speaks of the need – to use scriptural language – to flee for refuge to the hope set before us. And that hope is a little sanctuary. As John Kent again beautifully says,

“The weary, the tempted, and burdened by sin” – are there any of them here?

“Were never exempted from entering therein.”

Christ our sanctuary. “Holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens,” and yet the loving welcome He gives to those who feel their need of Him, in every spot, in every place, whatever their need, providence or grace, of this loving, almighty Saviour, Christ our sanctuary.

“Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.

* * *

Jesus, before Thy face I fall,
My Lord, my Life, my Hope, my All;
For I have nowhere else to flee,
No sanctuary, Lord, but Thee.

In Thee I every glory view,
Of safety, strength, and beauty too;
Beloved Saviour, ever be
A Sanctuary unto me.

Whatever woes and fears betide,
In Thy dear bosom let me hide;
And, while I pour my soul to Thee,
Do Thou my Sanctuary be.

Through life and all its changing scenes,
And all the grief that intervenes,
'Tis this supports my fainting heart,
That Thou my Sanctuary art.

Apace the solemn hour draws nigh,
When I must bow my head and die;
But O what joy this witness gives,
Jesus, my Sanctuary, lives!

He from the grave my dust will raise;
I in the heavens will sing His praise;
And when in glory I appear,
He'll be my Sanctuary there.

S. Medley