



# Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 61

Sound an Alarm

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,  
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom  
on Lord's day morning, 26th August, 1990**

**Text:** *“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand” (Joel 2. 1).*

In ancient Israel, trumpets were used for sounding an alarm. When a trumpet emitted a certain sound, the people knew it was an alarm, to prepare for battle, to gather together because of danger. The trumpet sounded, the people knew it was an alarm, and they listened. And the alarm trumpet had to be sounded by a priest, the minister of God. Well then, “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” Beloved friends, if ever there was a day when there was a need for the trumpet to sound, to sound an alarm, it is the present day and the present moment. I am thinking of the international situation; I am thinking even more of our churches and our own hearts. But the point, beloved friends, is this: the trumpet is to be blown *in Zion* – not in Baghdad, not in Washington, not in Westminster. The trumpet is to be blown *in Zion* – Zion, the professing church of God.

I think everyone realises the alarming nature of what we have been reading of concerning events in the Middle East, in the Gulf, and the danger of war, the things we have been hearing and reading in recent days. And the newspapers are sounding an alarm, aren't they? *Now I have not yet heard an alarm sounded in Zion.* “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” That is where the alarm has to be sounded. Since the days when I was a little boy and dreadful things were said about Hitler, I do not think I have read and heard such dreadful things said about any man as are now being said about Saddam Hussein. Now that is not blowing the trumpet in Zion. “O,” they say, “look at the aggression, look at the cruelty, look at the murder!” How many unborn children are murdered day by day and week by week in *our* country? The President of Iraq and his country have never been favoured with the light of the gospel. They do not have the Word of God. They do not have the preaching of the gospel. We have. It is not that man in Iraq: it is England,

it is our rulers, it is our religious leaders. And bring it closer, it is our churches, it is you and me. That is the alarm to be sounded in Zion – our sin, the church’s sin, your sin, my sin – not these terrible things concerning this man in Iraq. He does not know the light and liberty of the gospel. Our land has long known it, and rejected it.

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” What about our disobedience to God? What about our rejecting His ways? What about all the immorality? What about the broken marriages, the adultery? What about the desecration of the Sabbath day? What about England’s sin? What about the professing church, the awful blasphemies, the headlong rush for union with Rome, the awful denials of truth, of our most holy faith? “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” The whole purpose of the Book of Joel, as with most of the minor prophets, is this vital point of a nation’s sin, a favoured nation’s sin, Israel’s sin, and the vital need for solemn repentance, real repentance. We do not seem to hear anything about this. It is all this evil man and what he is doing and how bad he is. I suppose the implication is that we are not so bad.

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” Now at present these things that are taking place are causing people distress, causing fear that there may be another war. Let us be clear, it is right for us to pray that the Lord will prevent war. That is quite scriptural and permissible, and in the sight of God we did it together just now. But I want to ask you a question, and may we search our hearts: Why are we so grieved about what is going on at present? Why is it that we do not really want there to be another war? Because it will interfere with our lives. Because things will not be so easy. Because the price of petrol will go up. Because things will cost more. Because some things we do, we will no longer be able to do them quite as easily. If these are the only reasons why we want the Lord in mercy to prevent a war, then do not wonder if the Lord does not hear us.

I do not know if you have ever pondered this, beloved friends. There are two places in the Word of God which touch on this point, the reason why God’s people should seek peace. I wonder how many of you can stand up to this test. The first is that there might be greater opportunities for the preaching of the gospel in the earth, the extension of

Christ's kingdom, the honour and glory of His name, and true blessing in the church. That is Acts chapter 9. "Then had the churches rest" – after this period of turmoil and confusion. "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied." Is that why we want the Lord in mercy to prevent war, so that the churches might be edified, so that we might be edified? Is it so we might walk in the fear of God? The English nation does not want no war to take place so it can walk in the tender fear of God. It is the last thing Britain thinks of! It wants no war so it can go on in its sin and pleasure-seeking. Do we want peace so that we may pray earnestly for the comfort of the Holy Ghost and above all that we might be multiplied in grace and peace? The other place is 1 Timothy chapter 2, where we are commanded to pray for all those who are in authority, and the point there is that God's people might be able to walk before Him in peace and quietness, making their supplications for the king and those in authority. Why? "That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." Is that why England does not want the war to take place, so that peaceable lives may be lived in godliness and honesty? Solemnly, the answer is "No"!

"Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain." Now let us leave Saddam Hussein and the international situation, and let us come right home to the church of God and ourselves. "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain." The time has come in our churches when there needs to be the alarm sounded. How true that hymn:

"Few run with trumpets in their hand,  
To sound alarms by sea and land"!

Let me just linger here a moment and give you the background to this verse. We have this great army devastating God's ancient people, Israel (chap. 1. 4). God says it is His army. That is, He is in control. We have this terrible army of the locusts and the caterpillars and the palmerworms and the cankerworms. God says they are His army. All creatures obey God's command. He can work havoc in the earth through a despot; He can work havoc in the earth through a little insect.

"Creatures of every sort and kind  
Are all at His control;

The God that fills immensity  
Must reign from pole to pole.”

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain,” that God is almighty and sovereign and full of majesty and glory, and we dishonour Him by our low, paltry views of Him. We poor sinful worms of the earth dishonour the God of heaven by the unbelieving views, the low views we have of His sovereignty and majesty and glory and greatness. “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” He can use a mighty man; He can use a tiny insect. It never has been clear, and the godly divines have never altogether agreed on it, whether this havoc of the plague of insects was actually taking place, had taken place, or whether it was just a threat from God that it would take place. But really as it concerns us it does not matter. Here is this solemn warning of divine judgment, this plague of insects, the locust, the caterpillar, the palmerworm, the cankerworm. It is like the garden of Eden in front of them, like the desolate wilderness behind them (2. 3). I understand in some of these eastern countries even today, if a plague of locusts is seen coming, the people tremble, because they leave nothing. In front of them everything is fruitful, like the garden of Eden, but as soon as they have passed over, it is nothing but blackness and death, a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. What about these locusts and caterpillars and palmerworms and cankerworms? I want to speak very carefully and advisedly and graciously, beloved friends. There is a verse later in the chapter: “I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, My great army which I sent among you” (2. 25). I will restore those years that they have eaten. This is where I want to speak graciously. That is a favourite text among us, a most precious text, a most beautiful text. It takes up the whole theme of the blessing of restoration. O what a mercy that God is able to restore, to restore a church, to restore a person! Spiritual restoration, complete restoration – it is one of the most blessed themes of Scripture. It is one of the favourite, most loved texts in our chapels: “I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.” *But there is a lot which goes before that.* There is the awful devastation which has gone first, the awful warning that has gone first, the bitter repentance that has gone first, and it is then, and only then, that the Lord will restore the years that the locust has eaten. We long for one half and love it, but not the other.

*(The preacher then spoke of some of the trials and sorrows in his congregation during the year.)*

They have been like locust and the palmerworm and the caterpillar. In one word it is this: devastation. How many, when you have gone to bed at night, that describes you – you have been devastated? And when you awake in the morning you still have that awful sense of devastation resting upon your heart. Now we look at this word, and perhaps we plead it: “I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm.” We long for the comfort, for the restoration. We have thought much of the need of the Lord’s help, His mercy, divine comfort, balm in Gilead (Jeremiah 8. 22), precious consolation, precious promises, upholding. But what about bowing under these solemn judgments from our God? What about seeing the locust, the caterpillar, the palmerworm, the cankerworm, as God’s great army? To say, “Lord, where am I wrong? What is there in our midst? What is there in our hearts?”

“Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar” (2. 17). I believe the great need for us at this time is to be brought in true humility to the Lord’s feet in real repentance, especially at this time when there is also the devastation in our country and in the international scene.

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble.” Our carnal hearts are something like this. We come into trouble, whether it is personal or in the land or in the church, and we try to carry on just as we did before. “My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord.” We need to hear God’s voice in all His solemn judgments, personally and in the church of God and in the land and in the earth.

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” There are so many things on my spirit. Let me mention one or two. One is this: we need to sound the alarm concerning *formality*. I believe we are plagued with it. I believe it is one of the greatest enemies of those who love the truth. We are favoured to have the Word of God, we have the truth, we have the precious gospel, and we have our services. We come and we go, and we come and we go, and we come and we go. O the

formality of it! Now, “sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” May the Lord in His love and in His mercy save us from formality – formality in the prayer meeting, formality in the pew, and formality in the pulpit. The answer to formality is not informality. So many churches say, “We have become too formal. We must bring all kinds of different things in. Let us be informal.” That is not it. The answer to formality is true spirituality. How much reality is there in our coming? “Therefore now saith the Lord, turn ye even to Me with all your heart (2. 12).” How long is it since you came to chapel and worshipped with all your heart? And how long is it since you prayed, and prayed with all your heart? You know what the formalist says: “We cannot do it in and of ourselves.” Of course we cannot. We are completely dependent. But the point that we cannot do it of ourselves is not our excuse: it is our condemnation; it is our sin. We read in James concerning Elijah that he prayed earnestly. If you look at the margin it says this: He prayed in his prayer. Do you pray in your prayers? Do I pray in my prayers? O these prayerless prayers, these prayers with no prayer in them, these prayers that go no higher than the ceiling!

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” That was the great sin in Israel when Joel wrote – formality. There was not the grace, there was not the tender fear of God, but all the form was there. “Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to Me with all your heart.” That is reality, and that is true repentance. Of course towards the end of this solemn book, we have the answer to all these things – the outpouring of the Spirit. “It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh (2. 28).” One thing that has rested with me in meditating is this: the Book of Joel is a very neglected book. We do not know it very well. We do not read it very often. Perhaps it is too close for us. Perhaps it is too straight for us. But when that great sermon was preached, I mean the one which had the greatest effect, Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, he took his text from the Book of Joel. Then there was God’s work in their hearts as all the fleshly religion was burnt up. The locust, the palmerworm, the cankerworm destroyed all the false religion in those three thousand’s hearts. And then their hearts were pricked. And *then* there was the wonderful blessing. That is the answer to it, the secret. “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” But O to be delivered from this plague of formality! It is

like the plague of the locusts and the caterpillar and the palmerworm and the cankerworm. It is devastating.

“Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning.” Now this is it: “Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God (2. 13).” God’s ancient people in those days were very demonstrative – different from us. If it was a day of mourning, they would go with their best clothes on and tear them. You think of it, us coming to chapel and tearing our suits or dresses! That was the eastern sign of mourning, and they were willing to do it, they were even willing to bear the cost of having to buy new clothes. They were going before God continually and tearing their clothes, but their hearts were completely untouched, their hearts were hard. There was no tenderness of heart, no weeping in their heart, no rending their heart. Their garments were torn, but their hearts were not. There was the formality, and it was displeasing to God. “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” “Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord.” Beloved friends, every Sabbath we come here before God, and (figuratively) rend our garments. Every Monday evening we come, and before God in prayer we rend our garments. So before God week by week and month by month as a church and congregation and personally we rend our garments. God knows how many of us, if any, rend our hearts. If the Holy Ghost is poured upon us, that formality will go. It will not just be rending our garments, it will be rending our hearts. “I will pour upon the house of David ... the Spirit of grace and of supplication.” This is the rending of our hearts: “They shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him.” May the Lord bless us with real repentance, pour His Spirit upon us, deliver us from dead formality, give us grace to rend our hearts and not our garments. And it must begin personally. It is not that person the other side of the chapel, that one you are listening to in prayer. It is not putting the fault upon someone in the Middle East. It is me, Lord. “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Perhaps just in passing some of you are saying, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” The Lord “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.”

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” There is another thing, and that is *hypocrisy*. What is hypocrisy? To be one thing in secret and another thing before other



people. Let us be clear, all of us are plagued with hypocritical hearts by nature. We like other people to think well of us. O the hypocrisy in Zion! O the hypocrisy of our carnal hearts! “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion.” “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion!” I understand the word hypocrite originally means a play actor. Perhaps he smiles, but he is not really happy, or he cries, but he is not really sad. He is just acting a part. May God save us from merely acting a part when we meet together for worship. Never forget this: “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble.” And then what about the *worldliness and carnality*? We are plagued with it, aren’t we? And do not just think about the person sitting in front or the person sitting behind; it is the carnality, the worldliness of our own hearts. May the Lord in mercy deliver us from outward carnality, from outward worldliness. O that spirit of the world that puts the flesh first and the things of God last, that has a religion and yet knows nothing of spiritual-mindedness, knows nothing of affections set on things above! What about your communion with God? Are you satisfied with it? What about your meditation in God’s holy Word? Are you satisfied with it? What about your prayers? Are you satisfied with them?

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” These are solemn days, in the earth, in the nation, in the church, for us personally. May we not fail to hear the Lord’s alarm as He sounds it in His holy mountain, and may the Lord in the riches of His mercy pour His Spirit upon us. May the Lord in the riches of His mercy deliver us from formality and from hypocrisy and from carnality and from worldliness.

“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain.” Now just one last point. It is very solemn when an alarm is given and it is not heeded. In ancient Israel when the alarm trumpet sounded there were some people who just did not hear it. Do you know why? Because they were deaf. Deaf people did not hear the alarm. Now are there those here who are deaf to the warnings God gives? It is a solemn thing to live and die deaf to God’s warning! And then you see, that body they are taking out to bury in the cemetery does not hear the trumpet

of alarm being blown, because that body is dead. Is that why we never hear the solemn warnings of God's holy Word, because we are dead? The Lord says, "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble" – all of them. Let me ask you a question: have you ever once, *once* trembled before one of God's warnings in His holy Word? "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble."

But there is something else and this seems very solemn to me: when people hear the warning but they just do not want to listen, they put it from them, they close their ears to it. Let me tell you a little story. There was a house with a warning system installed for any smell of burning. It let off a most awful, deafening, frightening noise. The alarm went off very easily and there were children at the house who did not like this awful noise. So they found where the alarm was and realised that if they closed one door tightly and another door tightly the alarm could go off and it would not disturb them in the slightest, they would not hear it. We say, "How silly, how childish!" Yet left to ourselves that is just where we are by nature.

"Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand."

*(God willing, the evening sermon on the same text will be published next month.)*