



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 14

The Lord going before

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 4th July, 1985**

Text: *“I will go before thee” (Isaiah 45. 2).*

“I will go before thee.” As we look back, can’t we write the “T” and “P” against this – tried and proved?

“Thus far we prove the promise good,
Which Jesus ratified with blood.”

Despite all our sins and all our failures and all our unworthiness.

The portion I have read to you is one of the very short, simple promises of Scripture. What a vital difference there is between the first word and the last word, between the “I” and the “thee,” a holy, almighty God and a helpless, guilty sinner! But you see, there is a relationship between the two. There is a contact. You have it in so many of these sweet, short, simple promises. You just think of some of them: “I will help thee.” “I will be with thee.” “I will bless thee.” “I will uphold thee.” And no doubt your minds think of many more. Here, “I will go before thee.” In a word, it is everything, everything we are looking for the Lord to do for us that kindly and graciously He has promised to do. “I will go before thee.”

I suppose some of you are so concerned who the person is to whom the promise is made. Of course, it is made to the people of God. But here it is made to this man Cyrus. That has tried many of God’s people, because there is no evidence that Cyrus was a godly man. But it was made to Cyrus in his official character as the one whom the Lord had anointed to bring His people out of Babylon. So as it reaches to God’s people coming out of Babylon, it is made to those who are coming out of the Babylon of this world, who can find no rest, no satisfaction in it, who are returning to the heavenly Jerusalem, returning to Christ, who must have Him, who cannot do without Him. “I will go before thee.”

What a word that was that the angel spoke following the glorious resurrection of the Son of God, “Behold, He goeth before you into

Galilee.” You know, you find so much in Scripture of the Lord going before His people, going before them that they might be led in the right way, going before them to overthrow any enemies or to deal with any danger that lies in the pathway, going before them as their glorious Leader who leads them to victory and the victor’s crown, going before them in their conflict with sin, Satan and the world. “I will go before thee.” Going before them just as the pillar of fire and the cloud went before ancient Israel in the wilderness. “I will go before thee.”

Now let us be clear, beloved friends, if the Lord so clearly led, so clearly guided, so clearly defended His ancient Israel in the wilderness, with the pillar of cloud and fire going before them, do you think His people under the gospel will be less favoured?

“Let the fiery, cloudy pillar,
Lead *me* all my journey through.”

They had not to get in front of it. They had to wait for it. They had to watch it. When it moved, they had to move. When it stood still, they had to stand still. If it camped for a year, they must not move until the pillar went before. If it stood but for a day, and it may seem to be an eminently comfortable and beautiful place, still they must rise and go after it. They were not to have any choice or will in the matter. They were to be a completely dependent people.

“Let the fiery, cloudy pillar,
Lead me all my journey through.”

You know, the pillar of cloud and fire never made any mistakes. It led them in some strange ways, some strange places, but it always led them in the right way. “He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.” Now there were many times when they could not understand the way in which the Lord was leading them. But, “’Tis mine to obey, ’Tis His to provide.” When we cannot see His way, discern His purpose, it is ours to follow Him, to go after Him, as He goes before us.

As soon as the children of Israel came out of Egypt, immediately it almost seemed as if the Lord was going in the wrong direction, as if He had made a mistake. But they had to follow the pillar of cloud and fire. If the Lord had led them by the simple, straight way, there were enemies waiting for them. The Lord does not make any mistakes in His leading.

When John Newton was harbour master at Liverpool, he was noted for his punctuality. On only one occasion he was late and missed the boat going out of Liverpool harbour. A few minutes later, there was an explosion, and the boat went to the bottom. The Lord does not make any mistakes.

The renowned and godly Augustine always went home the same way. On one occasion he went a different way. He could not understand it, but along the normal way, there were people lying in wait to murder him.

I do feel that if a matter is specially laid on your heart, you should do it – that is, if it is not contrary to Scripture, not contrary to right things. I mean, you may feel that you have got a person specially on your mind. Then visit that person, or telephone that person, or write to that person.

One of the godly Puritan ministers one night could not sleep, and he had a person on his mind so much, he determined to get up in the middle of the night to visit him. His wife pleaded with him to wait until the morning, but he felt he could not, and he arrived at that man's house just as that man was about to take his own life.

It is following the pillar of cloud and fire, but it is never contrary to Scripture. Sometimes people say that they had a word. God never gives a word that is contrary to Scripture. It must be in accordance with Scripture. Then there are the inward movings of your spirit as made tender in God's fear. Then there is the opening and closing of doors. "I will go before thee."

What a beautiful word that is, that the Lord went before them in the pillar of cloud and fire to seek out a place for them to pitch their tent (Deut. 1. 33). Many of God's people have wanted the Lord to do just the same when they have been exercised as to where to make their home, or concerning some movement in providence, or concerning some change. We do need the Lord Himself to go before us to seek out a place for us to pitch our tent because if He does, it must be right. That does not mean that we will not be crossed, that we will not be tempted on it. The Lord led the children of Israel to some places and immediately there were difficulties, so that they murmured. He led them to Marah, but that did not mean that

they were not His people or that they were wrongly led. But there He sweetened the bitter waters with the tree cast in.

“I will go before thee.” He goes before His people as the great Shepherd of the sheep. “When He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him.” “I will go before thee.” Now there is something very beautiful in that, “His own sheep,” His by eternal choice, by redemption, by calling. His own sheep. He puts them forth. Sometimes He puts them forth in a way they have never been before. But He always goes before them. There is not one place where you shall step, child of God, but He has gone before. “Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you.” “I will go before thee.”

Then there is the great Shepherd leading His flock to the green pastures to make them lie down there, and some of you say, “Tell me, O Thou whom my soul loveth, where Thou feedest, where Thou makest Thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside?” You want the Lord to go before you personally and lead you forth with His beloved flock into the green pastures. “I will go before thee.” This great Shepherd, this chief Shepherd, this good Shepherd, not making any mistakes; even in the valley of the shadow of death, “I will lead thee.”

Of course, this embraces the whole of the sacred humanity of the Son of God, the whole of His life here upon earth as the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. You can see this across it all: “I will go before thee.” The temptation in the wilderness. “I will go before thee.” His baptism in Jordan. “I will go before thee.” Gethsemane, Calvary, the sorrows that His people know. “I will go before thee.” Death and the grave. “I will go before thee.” “When He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him.” “I will go before thee.”

It is like the ark of the covenant. “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you.” Keep your eyes on the holy ark. Do not get in front of it, but when it moves, be sure that you follow it, that holy ark which contains the blood-sprinkled mercy seat, your only plea, your only hope. “Looking unto Jesus.” “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan” (Josh. 3. 11).

Perhaps usually when we think of a beautiful word, a beautiful promise like this, we think of the Lord going before us to be with us, to help us, to bless us, to appear for us, to supply our needs, and how true it is, He does. But never forget this, that He goes before His people as their Example, and He says to them, "Follow Me." O what a standard! How far short we come! Yet the Lord does not lower the standard. It is the Lord Jesus going before, obeying the law, magnifying it, making it honourable, setting the pattern for His people.

"They marked the footsteps that He trod,
(His zeal inspired their breast);
And following their incarnate God,
Possess the promised rest."

Now Christ is the only way to heaven; that is as we consider it the way of forgiveness through His precious, sin-atonement blood, His obedience to the law, bearing its curse and bearing it away. But then you see, there is a following of Christ in that way. "I will go before thee." His blessed example.

There is a word which fits in with this, in the 16th Psalm: "I have set the Lord always before me." Now, beloved friends, we cannot altogether say that, can we? I mean that word "always," in our decisions, and in our actions, in our behaviour. We do not always set the Lord before us. Sometimes what appears before us is our own comfort, or our own will, our own desire, or our own profit, or our own advantage. Now can you, dare you, turn to a holy God tonight and say, "I have set the Lord always before me"? In all your actions, dealing with your children, your family, in your relationships with your friends, in the church of God, in all your business transactions, in all your plans for the future, in all your choices and decisions. This is the standard, and how far short we come!

We should seek grace to act as before God's all-seeing eye, in His holy sight. So we would live and so we would walk, and so we would follow the example of the Lord Jesus. "I will go before thee." An example of love, of faithfulness, of humility, of holiness, of zeal for the Lord's honour and glory, of separation from the world. "I will go before thee."

The Lord always goes before His people. But we can make this into a good prayer. We have various things we cannot do, we cannot manage ourselves. They are too hard for us. But it is a good prayer if we pray that the Lord Himself will go before us in these things. It is good when the Lord goes before us into the sanctuary on the Sabbath, preparing the hearts of the people. It is good when we have some difficulty to deal with and we find the Lord Himself has gone before.

Often, you know, it is in looking back. You look at various things in your life, that sorrow, that perplexity, that trial, what might have been, and as you look back, you can see how the Lord went before you in love and mercy, preparing the way, and dealing with it for you. O sacred times when we have these things that we just cannot manage ourselves, they are too hard for us, and all we can do is seek to commit them into the Lord's hands. Yet we feel that our prayers are so poor and our faith so weak. And then to prove that the Lord has gone before us.

We read of those two godly woman early in the morning of the resurrection day, and their burden was this: "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?" There was this great stone. They could not come in to the lifeless body of the Lord Jesus – lifeless, as they thought – without that stone being moved. And the whole point is that they just had not the ability to move it. "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?"

Is there anyone here and you have got a great stone that you want rolling away, and you cannot roll it away yourself? Is it a stone that is in your heart, and it is so hard, as hard as iron, and you cannot roll it away? Or is it a stone, a great stone, that comes between you and Christ? Those dear women saw this great stone coming between themselves and Christ.

Or is it that the great stone is at the door of *your* sepulchre? As you look forward, you think of the day of your death, and you see that great stone there. All those sins – if they are not removed, they will sink you" – and sink you eternally. But you know that there is something that can roll away that great stone from the door of the sepulchre.

"Why should we shrink at Jordan's flood,
Or dread the unknown way?"

See, yonder rolls a stream of blood,
That bears the curse away.”

“Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?”

But what is this great stone that you have? You see it before you. You cannot remove it. Some temptation, some burden, some trial, some deep sorrow, some bereavement, something in your life, your home, your family, your relationships, the church of God, something before you tomorrow or next week, your health, or the health of those you love, or the spiritual concerns of those you love. “I will go before thee, to roll away that stone.”

You see, when those dear, godly woman reached the sepulchre, what did they find? That the Lord had gone before them, that the Lord had been there already. When they came there, they found that the stone was rolled away already. And how often a child of God has had something, and perhaps you have feared it all the days of your life. It may be that you have feared it for more than fifty years. But when you have come there, you find that the Lord Himself has gone before and the stone is rolled away already. O how many a poor, trembling believer has come right down to the Jordan of death and when coming there – not before – has found to his amazement that the stone is rolled away already.

You remember John Bunyan’s Mr. Fearing – his great stone. He felt that when he came to the swellings of Jordan he would be overwhelmed, that he would sink in them. John Bunyan said he saw Mr. Fearing coming down to the swellings of Jordan, and the poor man was prostrated. But when he got there, he almost went over dry-foot. Bunyan said he had never seen the water so low.

“I will go before thee, to make all thy mountains a way.” “Who art thou, O great mountain?” It does not matter what it is; it does not matter how great it is. “Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain.” “I will go before thee.”

You see, here the Lord so kindly says, “And make the crooked places straight,” and He has, and He does, and He will. The most crooked place of all is the sin in your own heart, and there is only one thing that can make that crooked place straight, and that is the blood of Christ as He goes

before you and as He most graciously applies that precious blood. “I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight.”

You know, if the Lord gives you this promise, there will be two things. One is that you will have plenty of crooked places. Sometimes when the Lord give you a promise, you only look at one side of it. If the Lord gives you a promise, first of all you will have plenty of crooked places. But secondly there will not be a single one of them, however many they are and however crooked they are, but the Lord will make every crooked place straight, and when you come to the end of your life you will be able to look back and see every one of those crooked places made straight. Now what is your crooked place tonight, or tomorrow, or next week, or in the unknown way? “I will go before thee.”

The Lord Jesus Himself takes all the responsibility here. He is going to do it. “I will work, and who shall let it?” “I the Lord will hasten it in His time.” “I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight! This is something only God can do, but O what a wonderful ability He has to make crooked places straight! The fault with you and me is that so often we try to make them straight ourselves, and we only make them more crooked. But let the Lord take these crooked places in hand, and how straight He makes them! “I will ... make the crooked places straight,” all of them – not just some of them. It will not be that you look back and see how the Lord has made all your crooked places straight, but you are in one now, and that, it will be too much. It is all of them. “I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight.”

But I do want to speak of the Lord Jesus going before His people into heaven. “I will go before thee.” The Lord Jesus having suffered, bled, died, risen again triumphant, has entered into heaven. “For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.” And that means for sinners. “My little children, these things write I unto you that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” The Lord Jesus, entered into heaven, has gone before His people.

“Ye children of Zion, now dry up your tears;
For you the Redeemer in glory appears.”

This is the anchor ground of His people's hope, the One who intercedes for them, the One who has gone to prepare a place for them, the One who ever lives and reigns, who, with heaven and earth at His command, waits to answer prayer. "I will go before thee." That is why the Lord Jesus said that it was expedient that He should go. We would have thought it would be better for Him to remain on earth, but the Lord Jesus said, "It is expedient." One reason was this, that the Holy Ghost, the divine Comforter, might be poured upon them on the day of Pentecost.

The Lord Jesus has gone before His people as their Forerunner. "Whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus." That means that if He is His people's Forerunner, where He is, there one day they must be. "Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My glory." "Where Jesus is, there they must be."

I wonder if anyone here has ever prayed that prayer:

"Where Jesus is, there would I be,
And view His lovely face;
And sit to all eternity,
In chanting forth His grace."

"Whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus." As good Roland Hill used to sing, when his mind had failed completely, "This I do find, we two are so joined, He can't be in glory and leave me behind." "I will go before thee." The glorious Head is already entered into heaven. There all the members of His mystical body must one day be. Here is the safety, the security, of the people of God, that He has gone before, that He has taken possession of heaven for them. "I will go before thee."

"Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming." At the time of the harvest the first sheaf was taken along to the tabernacle or the temple, and there it was waved before the Lord. It was an earnest that soon the whole harvest would be gathered in. "Christ the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ's at His coming." "I will go before thee." May you view the Lord Jesus entered into heaven, possessing it for His people. May you seek grace to follow after, that where He is there you may be through His infinite mercy. "I will go before thee."

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me,” or, As you trust in God, trust also in Me. “In My Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” Now this is the Lord Jesus going before His people into heaven. He prepares them for heaven and He prepares heaven for them. The old preachers used to say that heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. Well, the Lord Jesus has prepared heaven.

This is a mysterious word. In what way did heaven need to be prepared? Well, the very presence of the exalted Redeemer, having made atonement for sin, having died and risen again, His very presence is the preparation, the preparation of heaven for His people.

The point with you and me is to be prepared personally, savingly, for that holy, happy place, where sin no more defiles. The great point with you and me is to be made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. How many of you of necessity have to pray to be prepared?

“I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” That is for ever and ever. “I will go before you.”