



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 29

The Unknown Way

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 30th June, 1985**

Text: *"For ye have not passed this way heretofore"* (Joshua 3. 4).

The Lord also speaks in an opposite way: "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way" (Deut. 17. 16). Now that is looking back. We do look back over our past lives. We realise how rapidly they have hastened away. We can never undo the past, never undo its sins and faults and failures. We can never go back to those former days. "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way." Now as we have that realisation that our days that are past are gone for ever, we are reminded of the shortness of time, the solemnity of eternity, that time does hasten away. Samuel Rutherford said, "This little inch of time." "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way."

But you see, there are two very wonderful things as you consider the past. One is when you think of your sins and failures and faults. They can be blotted out. But when you think of your blessings and your mercies, they can never be blotted out. "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way." But those past sins, those past failures, those past faults, O what a mercy that there is the precious, sin-atoning blood to take away the vilest of sins! With God's dear people, "Thou wilt cast *all* their sins" – all of them – "*all* their sins into the depths of the sea." That is that sea of which we sing,

"O grace, thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in thee!"

But when you look to the past, you look at your mercies and what the Lord has done for your soul, and those blessings, they can never be blotted out. They are for ever. You may lose the sweet sense of them. You may lose the feeling of them. But you can never lose the reality of them. You can never lose the blessings themselves.

So you see, there is a looking back and as we look back, "with mercy and with judgment" we see that our web of time has been woven. As we look back, we seek to raise an Ebenezer, HITHERTO. But as we look back, "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way." Now *that* is

looking back. *This* is looking forward: “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” That touches tomorrow, and the coming weeks, and the whole of the rest of our lives, and then the day of our death. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

Now let me remind you of the circumstances here. God’s ancient people had been wandering for forty years through the wilderness, and now they had reached the River Jordan. The Lord bade them go forward. There was this river and it was in flood. When it was in flood, it was not possible to sail over it. There was not any bridge across it. So they had come to this place with Jordan before them, and they had to cross over by divine commandment. God tells them that that this is a new way for them, an unknown way for them. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

But you see, there were two things to encourage them, two things to be a help to them. One was this, what God had done for His people in days past. Caleb and Joshua could remember it, although none of the others could. They were either too young at the time, or they had been born since. But they had heard how Israel once came, not to Jordan, but to the Red Sea. There was no way of escape, no way through. But they stood still and saw the salvation of God. They knew that the Lord was able to make a way. They knew that the Lord was able to bring them safely through. Why? Because He had done it in the past and because He was the same, faithful, unchanging God.

Now you come to your places and you can look back in the Word of God and you can see how the Lord has delivered in such places in times past. O His wonderful faithfulness! He did not fail them. And His wonderful power! It was not too hard for Him. And His wonderful love! He made a way of deliverance for them.

Then, secondly, they were told that the priests were to go before, carrying the holy ark of the covenant, and when they saw that move – not before – they had to go after it, and they knew that following the ark of the covenant, all must be well. The ark of the covenant was to them the special, immediate token of God’s gracious presence with them. In its fullest sense, the ark of the covenant, which contained the blood-sprinkled mercy-seat, represented Christ.

Now as they looked at the waters of Jordan, and Jordan was in flood, their hearts must have been full of fear. But they had not to look at Jordan. They had to keep their eyes fixed on the ark of the covenant that was going before them, and when it moved, they had to move, not before. When it moved, they had to follow, and they knew that following the ark, all must be well. They had got to keep their eyes fixed on the ark. “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan.” And in a gospel sense it is this: “Looking unto Jesus.” It is this: “To keep your eyes on Jesus fixed, and there your hope to stay.” “For ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

Now beloved friends, this is true of the whole of the unknown way in our lives – tomorrow and next week and the coming years, long or short, and the day of death at last. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” The way to venture into the unknown way, from which so often we shrink, is on the one hand by faith in the Word, knowing what the Lord has done, what He has promised, and that He is still the same, and then by faith in Christ, looking unto Him for help and to bring you safely through. “Looking unto Jesus.”

Now isn't this the way that all the saints of God have gone as they travelled home to glory?

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

“Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you.” Christ has gone before. The great host of the redeemed have gone before. “Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock.” “For ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

But you see, beloved friends, it is not just the whole of the unknown way that reaches out before you. You come across special things, special times in your life, special happenings, and you realise that this is for the first time. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” It may be a sudden move in providence, as you have to leave your own home and as you have to come to a place you knew not before, or a sudden accident,

as the world calls it, or an unexpected bereavement, or a sudden illness yourself or in your family, and “ye have not passed this way heretofore.” May you sweetly prove that as the Lord delivered His ancient people, so He will deliver you. As He was with them, so He will be with you. As He made a way for them, so He will make a way for you.

But beloved, the way you have got to walk it out is keeping your eyes on Christ. “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you.” You see, the ark went first; they followed. The ark went down into the river, and they followed. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” But the Lord has passed this way heretofore. “When He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them.” There is not a place where their feet tread, but the Lord Himself has gone before.

Some of you, I know, find it hard to realise. You say, “How can the Lord Jesus have trod this pathway?” “Well, none of us knows what solemn deeps the Lord Jesus went through in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. But we know that *in all points* He was tempted as we are, yet without sin. “For ye have not passed this way heretofore.” But it is following Christ as He has gone before.

What a beautiful word that is: “I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron.” “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you.”

“Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” So the Lord here kindly instructs you in the way in which you are to walk. Maybe many of you here are in something completely new. You have not passed this way. Well, it is that way of dependence on Christ. It is seeking to keep Him in view. It is seeking to follow Him. It is seeking to walk in obedience to Him.

Now notice especially that they had not to move until the ark moved. You may be praying about something, whether you ought to do it or whether you ought not to do it. “When ye see the ark of the covenant of the Lord you God ... then ye shall remove from your place.” Beware of ever getting in front of Christ. Some people have some idea, some plan in their life or in their business and they plan it all out, or they start it, and then, and not till then, they ask the Lord’s blessing on it. Now if the Lord

is not first, He will not be second. It is when you see the ark going, then you have to move. When you see the Lord moving, when you see the Lord working, then you are not to delay, you are not to hold back. “Then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.” “For ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

Now beloved friends, there will be times when you come to these new things, these things that are fresh in your life, and you just do not know how to manage them. Neither did Israel as they came to this fast-flowing, this overflowing river, with no way through and no way across. They did not know what to do, but the Lord knew what to do. I suppose that humanly speaking it was foolishness for this great multitude – they must have stretched over ten miles when they walked along together – this great multitude coming to a flooded river where there was no way through and no way over. They did not know what to do, but the Lord knew what He was going to do.

There is that beautiful word, “The Lord knoweth how” – not just that the Lord *knoweth*, but “The Lord *knoweth how*.” There are many times when we do not know *how* to do anything any more than we know what to do. But the Lord knoweth how. It is following Christ, keeping your eyes fixed upon Him.

Now I want to speak of the waters of Jordan first of all as the place of difficulty, the place of impossibility. You see, they came there and it was just an impossibility. There was no way over. There was no way through. I have often thought of it, the children of Israel knew that they could never enter the promised land without first of all crossing the River Jordan. All those forty years in the wilderness they knew that one day Jordan must be encountered. I suppose that all of them hoped that when they came there, it would be the dry season, and that there would not be much water in Jordan, and that it would be very easy for them to get over. But Jordan had never been deeper than when the children of Israel at length came there, and it was by divine appointment. God ordered it that the very moment when they reached the banks of Jordan, it was overflowing all its banks.

There are times in our lives when we realise that there is a trying day before us, some difficulty, some problem, some perplexity, something in your home, your business, your life, your family, your circumstances,

the church of God, and you know that you must face it, and you hope that when you come there, it will not be too bad. But when you do come there, you know that Jordan is overflowing its banks. The situation could not have been harder.

Do you know why the Lord orders it like that? It is that He might demonstrate His divine, almighty power. It is just as easy for the Lord to bring His people through Jordan in flood as when it was only a trickle. We look on the magnitude of our case. We look at how great our sins are, how terrible the temptation is, how impossible the case is. “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you.” It is looking to Jesus, not looking at the things that are seen, but the things that are unseen. But hear the Lord saying, “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for Me?”

Some of you may have that river, that deep river of difficulty or trouble or perplexity or distress in front of you. You wonder if it is going to swallow you up. You wonder if you are going to sink in it, or if you ever will go across it, if you must perish this side of Jordan. “Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.”

The priests had to go before, carrying the ark of God, and immediately their feet touched the brink of the river, then the waters were cut off. I take it that the miracle was this, that the waters stopped flowing as they came down from the hills. They rose up in one great heap, and then the water lower down flowed on and flowed away, and as there was no other water to take its place, there was this ground over which Israel could walk.

Of course, it was a miracle, and our God delights to perform miracles, and rather than that His promise should fail, and rather than that He should fail to supply His people’s needs, then a miracle will take place. For “sooner all nature must change, than one of God’s promises fail.”

Now what did the children of Israel have to do? How many boats did they have to build? How many bridges did they have to make? How many plans did they have to devise? The Lord did everything. O but you and I, when we come to these deep rivers of difficulties, we are devising our ways and planning our schemes. If only we could be nothing and do nothing, leave everything in the Lord’s hand, commit everything to Him.

“Stand still,” – O that is, do nothing – “and see the salvation of the Lord.”
“Be still, and know that I am God.” “Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall: for the man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day.” “For ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

Those of you in your deep things, with your deep waters, your overflowing rivers, who have not passed this way heretofore, may you prove the Lord’s ability to dry up the river, to turn your sorrow into joy, to sanctify your affliction, to make a way where there is no way, to command deliverance for you, for, “Thy way is in the sea, and Thy path in the great waters, and Thy footsteps are not known.”

How ancient Israel appealed to the Lord when they came to the time of darkness and trial and difficulty: “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days. Art Thou not it which hath dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?” O the Lord still has that blessed ability to make a way where there is no way. He will dry up Jordan rather than His promise should fail, His people perish. “Art Thou not it that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?” O that almighty arm of the Lord! It has lost none of its ancient power. It is not shortened that it cannot save. “For ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

So you see, first of all we consider the deep waters of Jordan as representing the place of difficulty, trial, impossibility. You remember how Elisha, the man of God, came to Jordan. There was no way across, but he had one thing, Elijah’s mantle in his hand, and he cried, “Where is the Lord God of Elijah?” and he smote the waters, and Jordan divided.

Can you answer that question, “Where is the Lord God of Elijah?” Who is the Lord God of Elijah? Well, we could say a lot of things. He is the God that will not let the barrel of meal, the cruse of oil fail. But here He is the One who divides Jordan. But where is He? In two places. He is in heaven, on the throne; He is almighty, He lives, He reigns. Secondly, He is with His people, still with His people.

“There’s a God in Israel still,
Lives and reigns and works His will;

Ever for His people cares;
All He is, or has, is theirs.”

You know, Jordan, which seemed to threaten their death, proved to be to them but an abundant entrance into the promised land, the land that flows with milk and honey. And how often you will prove that blessing in your trials, that the Lord brings you through the deep waters, but it is the promised land on the other side. He brings you through, and you do not perish in it, but He sanctifies it and brings you to the place of blessing, the land flowing with milk and honey.

I want now to speak of Jordan as the cold, deep, dark river of death. None of us personally have passed this way heretofore. One day each of us of necessity shall pass that way – that is, of course, unless the Lord returns. With some of you, it cannot be long until you come to the swellings of Jordan because of your age. But we know not who shall be next. There is a time to be born, and there is a time to die, and when the children of Israel came there, Jordan was overflowing its banks.

I remember years ago hearing Mr. Offer of Eastbourne speaking. He said that Jordan will never be so deep as when you come there. What he meant was this. It is one thing to read of it in the Bible, or to read of other people but when you and I come there, “If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” Do I hear someone saying,

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

“If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee” – that is, if little things have proved too much for you – “then how canst thou contend with horses?” – How will you do in greater trials? “And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee” – that is, in life – “then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” That is, in death.

Death is a divine appointment. “It is appointed unto men once to die.” But death is not the end. “After death the judgment,” and then

eternity, and eternal heaven, or eternal hell, the sentence, “Depart,” or the sweet command, “Come in.” Death is the fruit of sin. “Sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” By man came death, and “ye have not passed this way heretofore.” “How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” Have you got a sweet hope that it will be well with you, that you belong to the true Israel of God, that the Lord Jesus will bring you safely through? Have you a sweet hope that you are prepared? Have you sometimes said,

“In that dread moment, O to hide
Beneath His sheltering blood!
'Twill Jordan's icy waves divide,
And land my soul with God”?

There is only one preparation, and that is to have a personal, vital, saving interest in Christ, as born again of the Holy Ghost, taught our need and brought to flee for refuge to the hope set before us. O but what if unready? What if unprepared? “How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” Will it be to sink in Jordan's swellings, to sink eternally, to sink to rise no more?

Well, what was Israel's hope? “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan,” that holy ark representing Christ. It went first, and it went right down into Jordan. And the Lord has gone before His people. He has gone right down into the place of death. He bore all its bitterness, all its curse. “The waves of swelling grief did o'er His bosom roll.” And He went right down into the Jordan of death, and He died. But, beloved friends, in dying He divided Jordan for all His people. “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs.” “Not a hoof shall be left behind.” Never did the feeblest soul hoping, trusting in Christ, perish in the swellings of Jordan. He went first, and He went right down into Jordan, and He divided the waters. The whole of the Israel of God went over safely and not till then did Jordan flow on. The whole of the redeemed were brought safely into the promised land. “Following their incarnate God, possess the promised rest.” “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.”

O to be blessed with living faith in Christ, to view death in Him, to keep our eyes fixed on Him, to be following after Him, and then to be brought safely down and safely through, looking only to Christ in His

atoning blood and leaning only on Christ in His atoning blood. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” “How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” May the Lord give you this sweet assurance:

“When called the vale of death to tread,
Then to this Rock may I be led;
Nor fear to cross that gloomy sea,
Since Thou hast tasted death for me.”

“Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan.” “For ye have not passed this way heretofore.”