



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 45

What is a believer?

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 5th February, 1989**

Text: *“And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest” (Acts 8. 37).*

What a mysterious meeting place this was, in the middle of a desert! And how strange is the mystery of divine sovereignty! Here was this man, Philip, preaching down in Samaria. There were multitudes being blessed, and suddenly the Lord clearly intimated to him he must leave all those multitudes and go down to what he knew to be a barren desert. We read this: “he went.” That is grace. “And he went.” That is the obedience of faith. You notice that the Lord did not unfold the unknown way to him. He had to walk it out one step at a time. God could have said to him, “Philip, leave all this multitude. Go down to Gaza. There is a longing, seeking, enquiring soul there to whom I have an everlasting purpose of love and mercy.” But He did not. All He told him was to go “unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.” “And he arose and went.” And beloved friends, in the unfolding of the mystery of divine providence, it will be one step at a time. The Lord will lead you for today and there may not be anything concerning tomorrow. There is something in our carnal hearts which, before we venture, would like to see the end, would like to see the way all the way through. But the Lord reveals His will step by step as you go forward in the obedience of faith.

“His providence unfolds the book,
And makes His counsels shine;
Each opening leaf, and every stroke,
Fulfils some deep design.”

Now there was another thing with Philip. He had just had a dreadful disappointment. I mean the case of Simon Magus. There was this well-known man, well known for his wickedness, well known for his involvement in the occult, and what must have been known throughout Samaria as a wonderful conversion took place, and Philip baptized him on his testimony. Then everything went wrong. It was proved that Simon

Magus was only a deceiver, and this must have been a bitter disappointment to Philip. These were apostolic times, times when wonderful insight was given to the church of God. Why had God permitted this? Why had God allowed this awful disappointment? Why had God permitted this terrible trouble in the church? Why was it that this one who had caused them such great delight, whom they had so lovingly received, turned out to be a deceiver? Satan reasons close: "If you were wrong here, Philip, you are wrong altogether. If you are deceived in Simon Magus, how do you know you are not wrong in yourself? What about all these others you have baptized?" It was a time of special trial and darkness and bewilderment to Philip. And then the Lord here in a very special, marked way gives him a wonderful confirmation of His love and a wonderful confirmation that Philip was His servant and a wonderful confirmation that He was still with him.

Now if the Lord's love and mercy and kindness here was very wonderful to Philip, it was equally so to the eunuch. We read that he travelled that long journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship and was returning. And the whole suggestion of the passage is this, that the poor, dear man was disappointed. It seems that his soul had been quickened into life, that he had some glimmering of the truth and he had made that long journey to Jerusalem but he had not got what he wanted. A longing soul, longing for salvation, not getting what he wanted! And after this special attempt, surely he must have hoped for the best, and he returns, he has not got what he wanted. I believe there are a number of you here this morning on many occasions have known this experience. You have come to the house of God with a heart almost breaking with desires after Christ, and you have gone home again and again and you have not got what you wanted. Well, the Lord knew all about the eunuch and He knows all about you, and He will never deny the work of His own hands. He will carry it on and complete it.

"The time of love will come,
When we shall clearly see,
Not only that He shed His blood,
But each shall say, '*For me.*'"

How was it possible that Philip and the eunuch should ever be brought together? But you see they were. Here was a spot and a place that was

appointed from everlasting in the covenant of grace where this sinner and this gospel preacher should meet together, and where the eunuch should be blessed and go on his way rejoicing.

“Yea, He decreed the very place
Where He would show triumphant grace.”

But you see the mystery of divine sovereignty in it. We read of the eunuch driving along in a chariot to the place of his unexpected blessing and his unexpected baptism. A chariot is usually connected with war, trouble. But he comes in a chariot to the place of blessing. And you do not know what means the Lord will use and what ways He will bring you that you might be drawn to the very place where He will show triumphant grace. I believe this dear eunuch had an aching void that the world can never fill. O you do not know what a day will bring forth in judgment or in mercy. It was so unexpected, but the Lord does not make any mistakes.

It must have been bewildering for Philip. He reaches the desert. Why has God sent him here? What is going to take place? What is he to do? Suddenly this chariot comes in sight, obviously belonging to some eminent man, because the eunuch was a man of some considerable eminence. And then you see a further leading: “Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.” I like this: “And Philip ran thither to him.” “I will run the way of Thy commandments, when Thou shalt enlarge my heart.” Sinner, was there ever a time in your life when you ran to do the Lord’s bidding, constrained by His love, the obedience of faith?

“Philip ran thither to him.” He must have had one of the pleasantest shocks in his life. As he came near to the chariot, he could hear a voice, and when he was near enough to discern what it was, it was Isaiah 53 being read aloud. It must have been like music in his ears. You see how God opened up the way.

“Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.” Now wasn’t it a wonderful appointment that the very moment Philip arrived, the eunuch was reading about the Lord Jesus, reading about Calvary, reading about the Saviour’s death and the shedding of His precious blood, reading about the way of salvation? “He

was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened He not His mouth: In His humiliation His judgment was taken away: and who shall declare His generation? for His life is taken from the earth.” And then, you see, the question: “Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?” O what a sermon this must have been, with one man in the congregation (though there may have been a few of the servants also who listened) and with Philip preaching under the immediate anointing of the Holy Ghost, and the subject, the Lord Jesus, and that text concerning His wonderful love and sufferings and death.

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” And he preached it right into the poor eunuch’s heart. He must have spoken of His glorious Person and His everlasting love to His people, and how He bled and died on the cross and rose again; how His precious blood cleanseth from all sin; how He is now exalted in heaven to give repentance and the remission of sins. And it seems that the truth entered right into the eunuch’s heart. He found all that he wanted, all that he desired, all that he had long been waiting for.

And Philip must have spoken to him of gospel ordinances. “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water.” Again, you see the mystery of divine providence. It must have been an oasis in the desert. When God created the world, He knew that that little pool of water would be there in the desert and it would not be dry at the appointed time. “And the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Constrained by love, he wanted to walk in the obedience of faith.

The words I have read to you are the answer to this question. “Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” This, then, is the new testament qualification for baptism. But also it is the new testament qualification for getting to heaven. Now I do not think I am deceived in this, as I read the Word of God, that the qualification is the same: to be a true believer. Because we have it so often, especially in the gospel according to John: “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.” Now that is the qualification for heaven, and it is the same qualification for baptism. “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” We rightly speak of believers’ baptism. There are many ways

in which God's people are spoken of, but I have noticed this. In Scripture, in the Acts of the Apostles, they are spoken of as *believers*. It is a scriptural word. And solemnly those who are not God's people are spoken of as unbelievers. Perhaps more in a former generation than now, in our chapels this was the word: a believer. I think you will notice in so many of our hymns and especially in the little captions over the top, we have this word: believer – "Hymn to be sung at the burial of a believer," and so on. In recent years, very often we hear this expression: a *true* believer. It is sad that this has had to arise, and yet we know why it has – because there are so many who profess to be believers who are not *true* believers. But the vital thing is this: to be a believer, or (if you use the expression) to be a true believer, because only true believers will get to heaven.

"If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." I want to speak to you with God's help this morning of what a believer is, what a true believer is. Joseph Hart said, "Only He who made the world can make a believer." Now let us be very careful. There are thousands and ten thousands who take it for granted that they are believers, but according to the qualification of the New Testament, they are not. We think of that very solemn word in the Epistle of James: "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble." You see, you may believe that the Bible is true. You may believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God. You may believe that He lived and died and rose again and is now in heaven. Now that does not make you a scriptural believer. The pope believes that. But you can go further. You may believe in all the doctrines of election and predestination and divine sovereignty. You may believe in the whole lot. That does not make you a believer. The devil is a more sound theologian than anyone here on earth. The devil knows the doctrines of grace. The devil knows that Jesus is the Son of God. The devil has not any doubt about the infallibility of Scripture. The devil has not any doubt about who the Lord Jesus is. The devil has not a doubt about His bodily resurrection. Now the point is this. If our faith, our belief goes no further than believing that the Bible is true, that Jesus died to save sinners, that He is almighty to save, that His precious blood availed – if it goes no further than this, our believing goes no further than that of the devil, and does no good.

Our godly forefathers Warburton and Gadsby and Kershaw, especially John Kershaw, fought throughout their lives against what they called Sandemanianism. Really it was this. The belief was that true faith consisted in believing the record of the Bible, the historical account; if you truly believe that Jesus was the Son of God, that He lived and died and rose again, you are a true believer and you will get to heaven, completely distinct from a gracious experience, you would still get to heaven. Our godly forefathers saw the awful danger and deceit of that, that a Sandemanian faith was no better than the faith of devils and they contended against it. What was the fault with it? This. There was one ingredient lacking in it. There was no element of personal trust, personal commitment. A faith that lacks that personal trust, that personal commitment, is not the faith of God, not the faith of God's elect, not the faith that takes a sinner to heaven. It is not the faith spoken of here: "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." And sadly, solemnly, though not under the name, Sandemanianism in our day has again raised its ugly head, and this "easy-believism" prevails on every hand and in most unexpected places. Now it is not the believing of the Word of God. It is not the faith that is revealed in Scripture. It is not the religion that takes a sinner to heaven.

Now we must never be narrower than the Word of God and we must never be broader. This is the qualification: "If thou believest with all thine heart" – no more, no less. It is to be this. It is to be a true believer on the Son of God. And every sinner who will be taken to heaven, who lives to years of maturity, will be blessed with this precious, God-given faith, by the Holy Ghost, this true, wholehearted belief in the Son of God.

"If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." Let me try to speak of it very simply. First of all, this believing is a coming to the Lord Jesus. You will find in so many places, especially in John 6, sometimes the Holy Ghost uses the word *believe*, and sometimes He uses the word *come*. They are one and the same thing. So this believing is a coming – not a bodily coming, but a coming in prayer, a coming to the Lord Jesus under a sense of need, a coming as a sinner to Him who has forgiveness, a coming to be forgiven, to be cleansed in His precious blood. "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me, and him that cometh to Me I will in no

wise cast out.” Now tell me, have you a sweet hope that you are a coming sinner, a venturing sinner? Then you are this believer.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The vital thing is the Person to whom you come, God’s dear, incarnate Son. And the vital thing is what you come for. I believe all these true believers, all these coming ones, come in one way and it is this: nothing in self, everything in Christ. Now that is a true believer. You have nothing and you come to Him for everything. It is this:

“Lo! glad I come; and Thou, blest Lamb,
O take me to Thee as I am;
Nothing but sin I Thee can give;
Nothing but love may I receive.”

That is a true believer. Now are you one? Are you a true believer? Are you one who believes with all your heart on the Son of God, no more no less? You see, there are many, many sides to real religion. There is so much in it. But here it is narrowed down to this one, vital point. “One thing is needful,” to be a true believer on the Son of God.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” There are degrees of faith. There is great faith. There is weak faith. There is a faith of full assurance. There is a faith which is often accompanied with much trembling and many doubts. But the point is this: for that faith to be real. And the proof of its reality will be this: it cannot do without Christ. It must have Him and so, sink or swim, it ventures on Him. “If thou believest with all thine heart.” As we sing, “He makes the believer and gives him the crown.” For God gives faith, and then He tries faith, and then He honours faith.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” This faith is trusting, trusting completely to the Lord Jesus, clinging to Him.

“Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.”

Now that is a believer.

“If thou believest with all thine heart.” You cannot trust in yourself. You cannot trust anything you have done. You cannot trust your religion, your chapel attendance, your prayers. You cannot trust the

good opinion people have of you. You have to trust completely in the Lord Jesus, in His mercy, in His promises, in His faithfulness, in His ability to save to the uttermost. “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.” “Trust in Him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before Him: God is a refuge for us.”

“Trust in His efficacious blood,
Nor fear thy banishment from God,
Since Jesus died for thee.”

O the sweetness, the sacredness of it! To see this sinner. He may have many fears. He may be conscious of much guilt. He feels an aching void. He feels his own unworthiness. But he comes to this one point, that he must trust in Christ and in Christ alone.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” And then, you see, this true faith, this believing, is spoken of as a looking. “Looking unto Jesus.” I understand that word in Hebrews 12, “Looking unto Jesus,” is a word difficult to translate, and it literally means looking away from everything else to Jesus. Now that is true faith. It looks away from everything else to the Lord Jesus. It looks to Him alone. It looks to Him as the Son of God, an almighty Saviour. It looks to Him as a real Man. And it looks to Him especially as crucified, dying, bleeding for sinners. It looks to Calvary. It looks to the cross of Christ. That is what believing with all your heart is. And of course the scriptural analogy is of the serpent lifted up in the wilderness. It had all the appearance of the serpent, but there was no sting, no venom, in it. It was a serpent of brass. It represents the Lord Jesus made sin for His people. You do not need me to remind you of the story, do you? These Israelites bitten by the serpent, dying, no remedy, no cure. Whatever they attempted, still they died.

“Till the serpent Moses took,
Reared it high, that all might view it;
Bid the bitten look up to it.”

If there were those who had nothing the matter with them, who were not serpent-bitten, they did not look. If there were those who thought their own efforts would cure them, they did not look. If there were those who mocked at this strange remedy, they did not look. But to the dying Israelite, about to perish, how welcome were the good tidings of the

serpent lifted up! And as many as looked lived. Now that is faith. It was a strange remedy, but it was God's remedy, it was the only remedy, and it availed.

“Jesus, thus for sinners smitten,
Wounded, bruised, serpent-bitten,
To His cross directs our faith.”

And as many as looked lived. Some of them must have been quite close to that brazen serpent and they saw it very clearly. But the camp of Israel stretched a long way, probably the best part of a mile, and there must have been some on the outside of the camp who could hardly see that serpent of brass at all. It did not matter. As many as looked lived. Little faith will take you to heaven as much as great faith. It is the glorious Object of faith that matters. As many as looked lived. And some may have been so afflicted with their illness that they could hardly lift up their head, and with some, their sight must have been bad, and their eyes so dim. As many as looked lived.

“Jesus, thus for sinners smitten,
Wounded, bruised, serpent-bitten,
To His cross directs our faith.”

It is as a sinner, conscious of the greatness of your need, looking away from everything else to the only remedy, the cross of Christ, none but Jesus.

“If thou believest with all thine heart.” This is not something natural, not something you do, not something you work up. It is the gift of God. It is the Holy Spirit's work in your heart and it will always, if it is God's work, bring you to venture on Jesus only, to trust in Jesus only, to look to Jesus only. Now this is true faith. This is a believer. This is what takes a sinner to heaven. You know, there is a pathway to be walked out. There is a fight. There is a conflict. There are ten thousand things. But it is the sweet simplicity of God-given faith. The Puritans called it the queen of the graces. Love brings a warm heart. Hope brings expectancy. All the graces bring something. But faith does not bring anything at all. It comes with an empty hand.

“Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.”

“If thou believest with all thine heart.” So faith ventures on Christ. Faith trusts in Christ. Faith looks to Christ. And then faith hangs upon Him. There is a complete dependence in Christ. Faith leans upon Him. You have to rest the weight of your immortal soul and your sins and a never-ending eternity upon Christ. And that dependence, that faith, it can never let you go.

“Upon a life I did not live,
Upon a death I did not die,
Another’s life, Another’s death,
I rest my whole eternity.”

Now this is the religion that will take a sinner to heaven. This is true faith. This is a believer. It is not man’s work; it is God’s work. It is not the religion of the flesh; it is the religion of the Spirit. It does not exalt self; it exalts Christ. It is nothing in self; it is everything in Christ. “Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning on her Beloved?” The whole weight of her hope, her whole dependence, everything, she rests, she hangs on Christ. And He will never fail this one, never let her go, never let her down.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” You have that most beautiful illustration in Leviticus chapter 1 of the nature of true faith, faith as it hangs on Christ, depends on Him and Him alone. Here is an Israelite, conscious of the greatness of his need, longing to feel some peace, some hope, some assurance, burdened by this sense of guilt. Now the provision was this. He was to bring a lamb and as he saw that lamb slain, he was to lay his hand upon the head of the dying lamb. This is the most beautiful illustration of faith. Really that Israelite felt something like this: I am a sinner. I am the one who deserves to die. This lamb has never sinned. This lamb is innocent. But here it dies. It sheds its blood. And it is in my place, it is a substitute. I am the sinner. There is the guiltless. I am the one who has transgressed. There is the one who is innocent.

In putting his hand upon the head of that dying lamb, there was identification – the guilty with the innocent. In laying his hand upon the head of that dying lamb, there was complete dependence. Here the Israelite rested all his hope. He said, “I have no other. This is my only hope, as a guilty sinner, in the blood which now flows.” And so he there

confessed his sin and he laid his hand, leaned, on the head of that dying lamb. And,

“My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head of Thine;
While like a penitent I stand,
And there confess my sin.”

Beloved, have you a religion like this, and have you a faith like this? It will take you to heaven. It will land you safe in glory. Nothing in self, everything in Christ, resting, depending, hanging only on that dear, dying Lamb of God who made an atonement for sin. It is of necessity. There is a necessity, a vital necessity in faith. And it comes to this, and you know, with eternity before me, and the judgment day before me, this is where I have to take my stand, my only stand:

“Compelled I am on Christ alone to hang,
And plead that blood by which the church is freed.”

Now this is a believer. This is true faith. This is not only the qualification for baptism, but it is also the qualification for heaven, for you, young or old, so to be brought to feel your great need before God, that of necessity you have to venture on Christ, look to Him alone, trust only in Him, depend on Him, hang upon Him.

“And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart.” Now people say that I never preach baptism. Well, I have always been so concerned, I never want to push people in, and perhaps I have gone to the opposite. But this is the answer to a question: “What doth hinder me to be baptized?” And if any of you here this morning are burdened and concerned, if this is your question, “What doth hinder me to be baptized?” this is the answer, and I trust not my answer, but the answer of God Himself, the answer of the New Testament. Let us keep close to Scripture. “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”