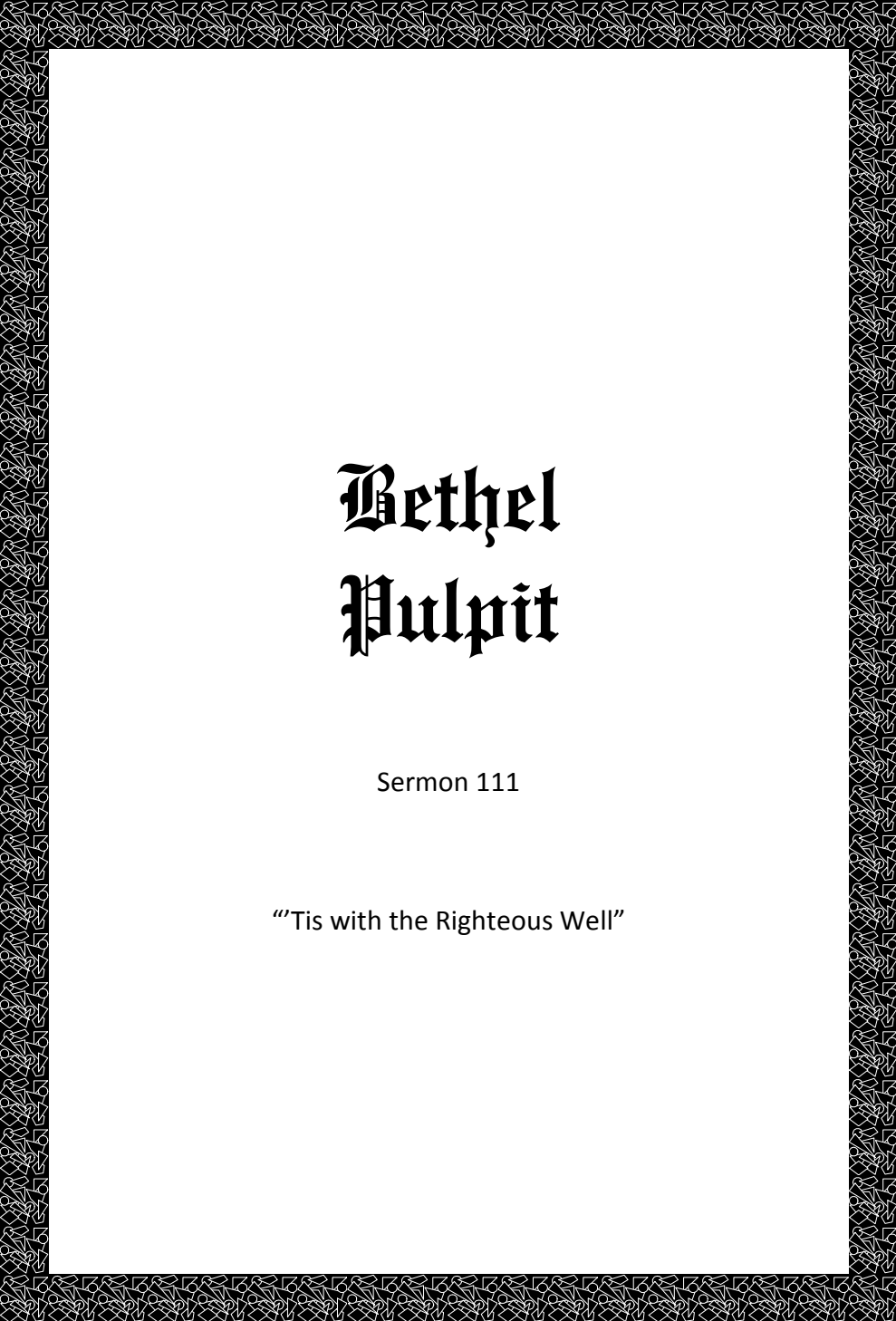




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 111

“Tis with the Righteous Well”

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 18th September, 1994**

Text: “Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him” (*Ecclesiastes* 8. 12).

Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon when he was an old man, and the great point of it is the vanity of this world. That is the one thing Solomon had learned. He had been blessed with earthly wisdom, and he had used it; earthly pleasure, and he had used that; earthly riches and he had used that. But he comes to the conclusion that all is vanity and vexation of spirit. That is why some of the language almost seems cynical. “Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry; for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun” (verse 15). He is speaking of the best that human reason, that natural reason can find out. Perhaps some of you young ones are sometimes puzzled by some of the things in Ecclesiastes. They seem so wrong, so contrary to Scripture. “Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry; for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.” He is speaking of just how far human wisdom, human reason can go. It is not for nothing that the Song of Solomon follows Ecclesiastes. That is the place where true happiness can be found, in the love of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in a loving union with Him.

So Solomon takes upon himself, as an old man, as the king of Israel, to be a preacher. He takes the office of preacher, and that is what the word *Ecclesiastes* means. It just means, *the preacher*, the title given in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. As most of you know, just before the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Old Testament Scriptures were translated into Greek (it is known as the Septuagint) and they were spread throughout the known world. Being in Greek, instead of having the Hebrew word for *the preacher*, it calls it *Ecclesiastes*. But we leave all that.

“Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him.” Solomon sees a problem, a problem which so many people have seen, a problem which has worried people so much. Well, let us put it simply. You may have this problem yourself. You may be trying to walk tenderly, prayerfully in the fear of God, and everything seems to be going wrong, and your next-door neighbour may be breaking the Sabbath, dishonouring God, and yet with him everything seems to be going right. Well really this is the problem Solomon sees, and which he mentions and deals with in this chapter: when everything seems to be going right with wicked people. For instance, he says, “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (verse 11). In other words, God has said He is angry with sin; God has said He will punish sin; God has said that in no way will He pass by sin; but that sentence against the evil work is not executed speedily. Because of that people do just what they want. They say, “Where is God? He does not take any notice.” “Therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.”

Some time ago a man wrote to a secular paper. He said, “Look at me. I am a farmer. I do not believe there is any God. I ignore His ways. I do most of my work on Sunday, and never go to church. Yet I have a better harvest than anyone else in the district. Why is it?” Remarkably, the secular paper put an editorial note underneath. It said, “God does not pay His bills in October.” Sentence against evil work will be executed, but God has His own time of reckoning. “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.”

Again, Solomon says, “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous” (verse 14). This godly man tries to do something. You think it would prosper. But it all comes to nothing. This ungodly man tries the same thing, and everything goes well. This has always been a problem, and sometimes with some of God’s little ones it is a special problem. It may be a problem with some of you this morning. Well, Solomon tries to answer it.

Without going into it in great depth, the psalmist in the seventy-third psalm deals with exactly the same problem. He was envious at the prosperity of the wicked. The poor psalmist, it affected him so badly, he said his feet well-nigh slipped. He saw the wicked, everything going right; he saw the righteous, everything going wrong. He came to this conclusion: "It was too painful for me." Perhaps some of you come there. It is too painful for you, the disappointments you have. You look at other people's children and what happens. You look at your own children and what happens. You look at your plans; you look at other people's plans. Really, the psalmist in Psalm 73 and Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7 come to the same explanation, though they put it a little differently. The psalmist puts it like this: "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end." The psalmist saw it in the light of eternity, that the wicked were having a lot of happiness, but it was all the happiness they would ever know. The righteous were having a lot of sorrow, but it was all the sorrow they would ever know. It is a wonderful thing if we are able to bring things into the sanctuary, to weigh them in the balances of the sanctuary. O the conclusion when the psalmist saw this: "Nevertheless I am continually with Thee: Thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." That is where he saw the difference: *afterward*. "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."

Solomon really comes to the same conclusion here. "Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him." God has a people, and whatever may happen to the wicked or not happen to the wicked, "it shall be well with them that fear God." "Surely I know," he says. It is not something we always see; it is certainly not something we always feel, but he says, "Surely I know." Like Paul: "We *know* that all things work together for good." He did not say he always sees it; he did not say he always feels it; but he knows it. "One thing I *know*." "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

"Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him." In other words, God will ever have a people, and whatever happens to them or does not happen to them, God loves them

with an eternal love. They belong to Christ; they are led and taught by the Holy Spirit; there is a watchful providence over them for their good, and heaven shall be their eternal portion. “*But* it shall not be well with the wicked.” Well, there is a line of demarcation here. I would that all or you might see it, every one of you, especially that you children, you young people might see it, that line of demarcation between God’s people and those who are not His people, the righteous and the wicked, or as we have it here, those who fear God and those who do not fear Him.

“Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him.” Well then, if it is going to be well, well for ever, well to all eternity, with those who fear God, the two important questions are: who are they? and, am I one of them? Let me then briefly, simply, seek to explain what the fear of God is, those who possess it, and its gracious, sanctifying effects. By nature we may hear of God, believe there is a God, but we do not fear Him. There is not the spirit of awe and reverence. We may sing hymns and listen to preaching, but there is not that tender heart which the Holy Spirit has made soft, impressionable, submissive. There is not the awe, there is not the reverence for God. When the Lord begins His work in a sinner’s heart in the new birth, then He places there His holy, tender fear. And that will always have an effect. You will never be the same once you possess it. It will make you different. And the vital point in possessing the holy fear of God is this (and Solomon knew it and he emphasises it here): you will have a religion before God. Solomon does not just leave it and say, “I know that it shall be well with them that fear God.” He explains it, he emphasises it. He says, “them ... which fear before Him.” O to have this true religion which is before God, before His all-seeing eye, knowing that He is the ever-living God, great, majestic, sovereign, eternal, in heaven, but that His eye is upon us. He sees all we do, wherever we go. He sees how we behave, how we think, the very secrets of our hearts. If we possess God’s holy fear, we realise this, that our lives are lived before His all-seeing eye, that everything we do is naked and bare before Him. Then your life will never be the same again.

This fear will work in two ways. First of all you will be afraid of Him. First of all you will be afraid of sinking into hell. First of all you will be afraid of His anger. There is such a thing as being afraid. People say, you should not make the hearers afraid in preaching. Well, one

preacher said that close to where he lived there were poisonous snakes. He taught his children to be frightened of them. He taught his children to identify which they were and to run away from them. He said, “Was I an unkind father in teaching my children to be frightened of those poisonous snakes?” Well, there is such a thing as frightening people. The truth should frighten you in the beginning, frighten you because of your sins, because God will punish sin, because of a solemn eternity. Just as much as those children when they were taught to be frightened of those snakes ran away from them, so under the Holy Spirit’s teaching you will flee from the wrath to come.

But then when the Lord deals with His people, there is not just this fear, being frightened, being terrified. When God makes Himself known in Christ, reveals Himself in the gospel, when there is a little hope in His mercy, a little love felt towards Him, then it is more of a loving, tender reverence and awe, like a loving child for a loving parent. That is what the old preachers meant when they used to speak about a filial fear as contrasted with a slavish fear. Yet you will still be afraid of things. One thing will be this: you will be afraid of offending God. You will be afraid of sinning against the Lord Jesus Christ, not in a legal way, but out of love. You will be afraid of grieving His servants, and you will be afraid of grieving His people. Now there is not the prevalence of God’s holy fear today that there once was. The common thing today is to say, “He is a Christian.” A hundred years ago the common expression was, “He is a God-fearing man.” You do not hear it so much generally now, do you? I remember years ago even worldly people, ungodly people, would use that expression. They would say, “He is a God-fearing man.” It seems to have dropped out of the English vocabulary generally, but Scripture is full of it.

“Them that fear God, which fear before Him.” Now to have a religion in the sight of God. First of all, the terror of His holy law, the terror of sinking into hell. And then, still with fear, but in a loving, gracious way, a fear of grieving Him, a fear of grieving His servants, a fear of grieving His people. O your heart will be made tender. Your religion will be before God. It will separate you from the world. It will give you a tender conscience concerning sin. You will pray to be forgiven. You will pray to be kept. It will give you a personal religion, a secret religion. It will constrain you to do what is right. It will preserve you from that which is wrong. Sadly, solemnly, we do not always act under the influence of

this fear, do we? That is what the wise man means when he says, “Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.” Seek to walk under its influence.

Well sometimes it comes to points. Either you and I fear God or we do not fear God. Many things could be said about real religion, but Solomon comes down (do not misunderstand me) to the lowest point of grace. He does not speak of raptures or full assurance or special blessings. He speaks of what every saved sinner possesses right at the beginning, even down to the smallest, the feeblest lamb in Jesus’ fold, for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” O dear soul, if the Lord has put His holy fear in your heart, whatever you possess, whatever you do not possess, then it shall be well with you. Whatever problems and difficulties you are in at present, it shall be well with you.

“Surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him.” Now, this does not mean that everything will seem to go well with you. It certainly does not mean you will be exempt from trouble. Look at Mordecai, ostracised, suffering, and Haman exalted. Look at Joseph, falsely accused, thrown into prison, forgotten. “Until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him.” Look at Job. God said, “My servant Job ... a perfect ... man,” and everything seeming to go wrong with him. “Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him.” You say, How do you explain it with Job and Joseph and Mordecai? Well really the Word of God explains it; it is not how we explain it. But the Word of God explains it in two ways. First of all, that all these things which were happening in their lives were all working for their real, lasting, eternal good and God’s honour and glory. Look at Joseph: every step downwards a step towards his exaltation. “Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good.” Look at Mordecai: forgotten, but it was all working for his real good because he was remembered at the right time. And look at Job: the end of Job was better than his beginning. In a word it is this:

“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

“His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;

The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.”

Now you may be in it this morning. You may be in it like Joseph, like Mordecai, like Job. But it is not the end yet. “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof.” God sees the end from the beginning. Like the master weaver putting in the dark threads and the bright threads, and to those down below it all seems a mass of confusion, but from above the Lord sees nothing out of place. “With thee it shall go well.” Look at Paul when everything seemed to be going wrong, everything, and the Lord gave him that gracious understanding, and he said, “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” “I know that it shall be well with them that fear God.” It is not the end yet with you. “Surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off.”

“I know that it shall be well with them that fear God.” But secondly, the way the Word of God explains it is like this: in the light of eternity. Whatever problems and sorrows and disappointments and difficulties God’s people have, those who fear Him, they are the chosen of the Father. They are redeemed with the blood of Christ. They are led and taught by the Spirit of God, sanctified by Him. They are loved with an everlasting love. They are the subjects of a Father’s care. There is a heaven of everlasting blessedness before them. “Surely I know that it shall be well.” It shall be well now, in the sight of God, but it shall be well with them eternally. “What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?” “These are they which came *out* of great tribulation.” They were not left to sink in it, to perish in it. “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. *Therefore* are they before the throne” – on no other ground, for no other reason. “*Therefore* are they before the throne.” This is it: it shall be well to all eternity. “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

“I know that it shall be well with them that fear God.” Now unbelief cannot see it and carnality cannot see it, but faith sees it. You

remember the Shunammite woman. The Word of God says she was a great woman. Well, she was. I suppose literally it meant she was a woman of means, a woman of wealth. But she was a great woman in faith. She had that awful tragedy. Her only son when quite a young boy was suddenly smitten with sunstroke, dying. And the prophet Elisha sent a message by a messenger to her as she hurried to see him. "Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child?" Is it well with thee, a broken-hearted, bereaved woman? Is it well with thy husband? It seems he does not yet know the tragedy which awaits him. Is it well with the child, that child lying dead? "And she answered, It is well." It is only living faith, in the midst of disappointments and sorrows, that can say, "It is well," seeing that disappointment is His appointment. O to possess the religion, the faith of the Shunammite woman! "Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well."

"Surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him." Solomon puts a *shall*. It *is* well, but it shall be well. So the prophet: "Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him." The righteous, those who by faith have renounced their own righteousness as the ground of their justification, the ground of their hope, and who are led by the Spirit to trust wholly, entirely, completely in the righteousness of Another for their acceptance, their justification: the righteousness of God's dear Son, His glorious righteousness, imputed to the sinner as He Himself takes the sinner's sins, atones for them and bears them away. Now these are the righteous.

"Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well." It is a commission; it is a gospel commission. And really this is the glory of the gospel, that there is a righteousness provided without money, without price, on the grounds of grace, freely given to every sinner brought solemnly to realise that he has no righteousness of his own. Have you a sweet hope that you are among the righteous, because you know you have no righteousness of your own, you know your best is stained and dyed with sin, your all is nothing worth, you know your righteousness is as filthy rags so you cannot depend on it, you dare not plead it? You have to come on another ground: the righteousness of Jesus, your only hope, your only plea. You say, "If ever my poor soul be saved, 'tis Christ must be the way." His

righteousness for me to build upon, to rest upon, to be clothed in, to be covered in. Have you a sweet hope you are among the righteous? “In time and to eternal days, ‘tis with the righteous well.” “Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him.”

“I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him.” O, you say, how will it be in that great day when I leave earth, when I breathe my last breath, when I die, when I step down into the swellings of Jordan, when I meet my Maker, when I stand before His judgment seat? How shall it be with me then? If through mercy you fear God, surely it shall be well with you. Let us be very clear; there is not the slightest contradiction between Solomon and Isaiah. One says, “It shall be well with them that fear God,” but the other says that it is well with the righteous. They are the very same, the identical people. Everyone who has an interest in the righteousness of Jesus is blessed with the fear of God, and everyone blessed with the fear of God has no hope save in the righteousness of Jesus. They are the very same people, the identical people. It shall be well with them. What a word is this:

“Jesus, the mighty Saviour, lives,
And He has conquered death and hell;
This truth substantial comfort gives,
And dying saints can sing, ‘Tis well.”

This is the ground. “It shall be well with them that fear God,” because the Lord Jesus died, He rose again and ascended into heaven, because He lives eternally to save, and because He kindly says, “Because I live, ye shall live also.” The Lord seal some of these things to your hearts.

“Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God.” I must close, but there are three words, and if a man had the grace and the ability, I think he could preach a sermon on each of them. *Yet*. You cannot get beyond it, you cannot sink beneath it, despite all these things, the sins, the fears. And then, *surely*, the certainty of it, the divine realities, the covenant realities, the divine certainties in this dying, changing world, when nothing seems certain, nothing seems sure. *Surely*. And then, *I know*. Well, there are many things we do not know. There are many things even Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, did not know. But he could come in here, and we can too: there is one thing I do know. *Yet*,

surely, there is one thing I do know. We can find a resting place here when we can find a resting place nowhere else. “Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him.”