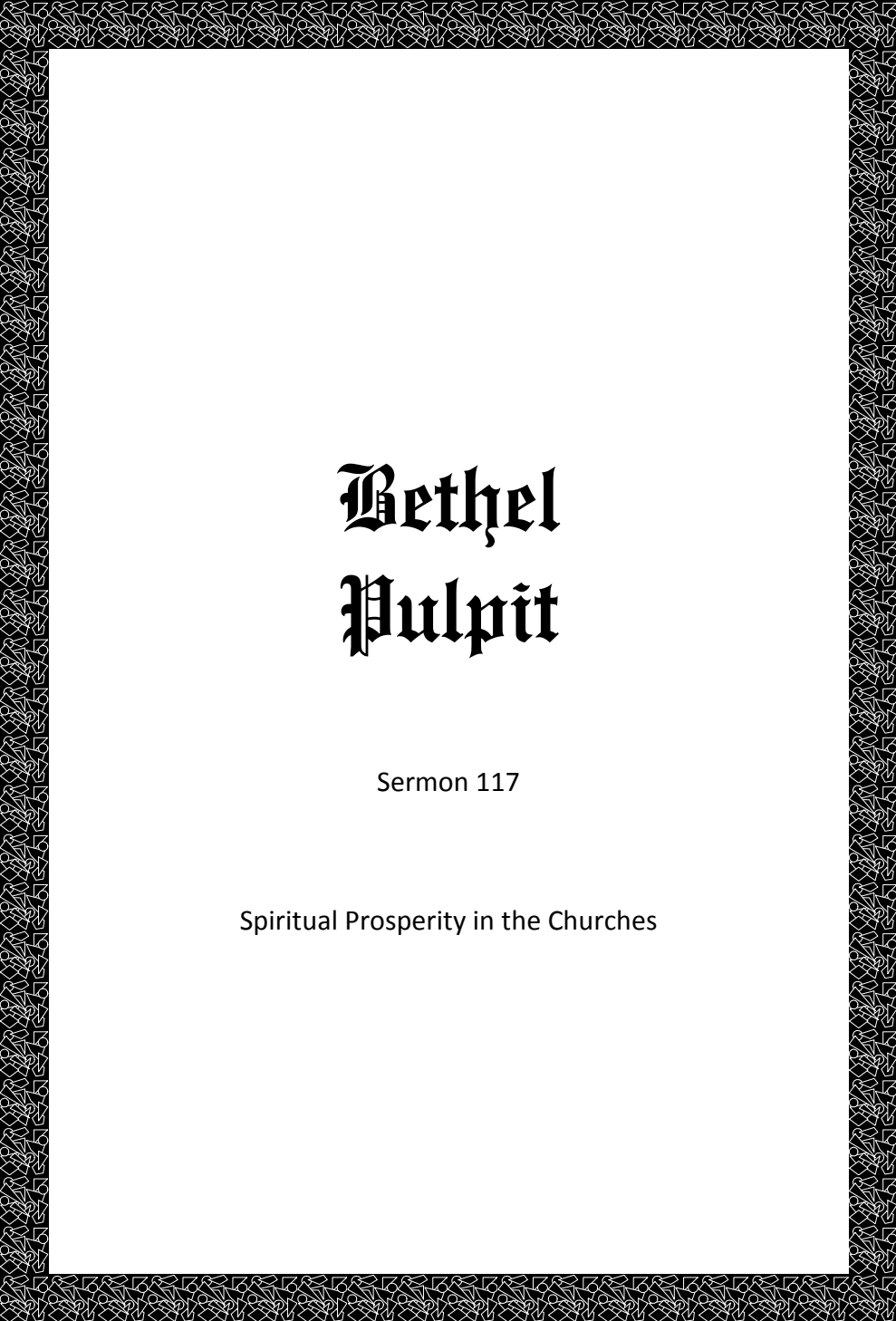




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 117

Spiritual Prosperity in the Churches

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 5th February, 1995**

Text: *"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" (Acts 9. 31).*

This verse begins with the word *then*. "*Then* had the churches rest." There had been a time when there had not been much rest for the people of God. There had been problems and perplexities and difficulties and persecutions, but now the Lord in mercy had brought them through. And really this chapter gives a very wonderful account of how the Lord delivered them. Most of the problems and perplexities the people of God were experiencing were through a man named Saul of Tarsus, a bitter enemy of the people of God. It is very, very clear that God's people were praying for deliverance, praying to be set free. I wonder if any of them, if one of them, expected that their deliverance would be in the way that it happened. Perhaps this man Saul of Tarsus would be smitten with death or removed in some other way. But the Lord says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways." The way the Lord in His sovereignty took was to call this wicked Saul of Tarsus by His grace, make him a true Christian, make him a preacher of the gospel, make him an eminent apostle.

Really there were two things the Lord did at the same time. God's people had two great troubles. One was that this man Saul of Tarsus was threatening them with destruction and death. But the other was that they had such an eminent, godly young man named Stephen whom they hoped would be such a blessing, and he was taken away in the persecution and stoned to death. So they had this wicked man Saul opposing them and also the loss of this man Stephen. When the Lord called Saul by grace He dealt with them both at once. Do you believe the Lord can do that? He delivered them from the persecution of Saul, but more than that, He raised up this Saul who was persecuting them to take the place of Stephen and made him the apostle of the Gentiles. What can the Lord do? What can He not do?

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.” This wonderful work of the most high God, looking in kindness and mercy and love upon His people, and delivering them, setting them free. We just pause here to remember that whatever your problems, burdens, perplexities are, the Lord can deliver you. If you cannot see a way, the Lord can. Whether it is personal, in your family, in the church of God, in your circumstances, whatever it is, the Lord knows how to deliver His people. Not just the Lord *knows*, but the Lord *knows how*. “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations.”

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.” And what followed these strange, mysterious things? What followed? A period of wonderful blessing, a period of wonderful prosperity. If you want to know what real, spiritual prosperity is, here you have it very simply explained. “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.” Beloved friends, may this spiritual prosperity be ours. May we be able together to pray for it, to seek it from our God.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.” This is the first time in Scripture where we read the word churches in the plural. We have had the word *church* mentioned before. The Lord Jesus said, “Upon this rock will I build My church.” Earlier in the Acts of the Apostles we read of the church at Jerusalem. But now we have the *churches*. There were several churches established through Judaea and Galilee and Samaria. The churches. Now beloved friends, let us be very clear what we mean by the word *church*. I wonder if you young people, you girls and boys, really know what we mean by the word *church*. If you were to go out in the streets or ask some of your friends what we mean by a church, they would speak about some building. They would perhaps tell you about the parish church, or some people might think of it more like this: the Church of England, or the Roman Catholic Church, or the Methodist Church. Let us be very clear on this. In the Bible the word *church* never means a building. It always means people. Also, the word *church* never means an institution, an organisation.

Well then, what are we to understand by this word *church*? Really the word signifies those who are called out, the called-out ones. And the

word is used in two different senses in the Word of God. First of all, the word *church* is used to describe the whole body of all God's people in all ages, His chosen, His redeemed, the church of God, the people whom Christ loved and died to save, the church of which Christ is the Head, the church which is His mystical body, the church which one day, a perfect, complete church, will be with Him for ever and ever in heaven, "not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." That is the first way in which the word *church* is used.

But then, secondly, we have the word *church* used as here, the churches of Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, these visible gatherings. We have the church at Rome to which the Epistle to the Romans was written. We have the church at Ephesus. In the Book of the Revelation we have the seven churches of Asia Minor. The Word of God is exceedingly clear that God has appointed that His dear people shall be gathered together in these local churches, the outward manifestation of the church of God. I think you will find this, that in the New Testament there is a tremendous amount of teaching concerning the church.

Sometimes we fall into a fault, I think. We preach, we read, we sing, we hear, we talk about the teaching concerning salvation, a sinner and Christ, a guilty soul hoping only in the Redeemer's most precious blood. This is right, because it is vital. This, of course, is the foremost thing in the New Testament, the personal teaching of sin and salvation. This is the vital thing; this is the foremost thing. But beloved friends, it is not the only thing. We need to watch that we do not neglect large pieces of the New Testament. So much of the New Testament is devoted to this: first of all, salvation; but secondly, the church – what it is, what is its purpose, why does it exist? So much of the New Testament explains, makes clear, that God has appointed that His people shall be gathered together in churches and so much of it explains the purpose of those churches, why they exist, how they have to be organised, the rule of Christ in the church, the obedience of His people to Him in the church.

"Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria." What then is a church? Well, first of all the people who compose the church must be born again of the Holy Spirit. They must be true believers on the Son of God. The New Testament makes this very clear. Then upon their profession of faith, they must be baptized by

immersion in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Then also they must hold the truth in its purity. Then also they must be walking consistently in the fear of God. Then also they must meet together for worship. But not one of those things, nor the whole lot of them together, constitutes a church of Jesus Christ. J. C. Philpot once said that all those things no more make a local church than a pile of bricks thrown on the floor makes a house. There must be a uniting together, a solemn giving up of ourselves to each other and to the Lord, which takes place whenever a person is favoured to join the church. It is yielding ourselves up one to another to seek God's honour and glory, to worship together, to seek His will, and yielding ourselves up together to Christ.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified.” What is the purpose of these churches? The purpose is the honour and glory of God and an open, outward witness to Him here on earth: an open witness to the truth and authority of Scripture, a witness to the glorious truths of the gospel, the glorious doctrines of the gospel, a witness to Christ the Mediator, the only way of salvation, the only way to heaven. So in the church of God there is to be the gathering together for worship. There is to be the preaching of the gospel. There is to be the administration of the ordinances, the administration of believers' baptism, glorifying Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, a witness that sinners are being called out of nature's darkness into His marvellous light, a witness that God's work is going on, a witness that our only hope is in what the Lord Jesus accomplished in His death, burial and resurrection, a witness of our desire to die to our past life, to sin, to any hope of salvation short of Christ, and to rise again to newness of life. The administration of the Lord's supper witnesses the central truth that Jesus suffered and bled and died; and like the ordinance of believers' baptism it is an ordinance for sinners. Our profession: I am a lost, ruined, guilty sinner, and I have no hope except in the Lord Jesus, His broken body, His shed blood.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.” So the Lord has ordained that His people shall be gathered into churches until the end of time. Do not forget it is concerning the gathering of the church He says, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst.” So I have tried very, very simply and very briefly to say what a church is and what the purpose of the church is. And

then so much of the New Testament deals with how the local church should be organised, with pastors and deacons and members, the body of Christ of which He is the glorious Head, a spiritual building of which He is the Foundation. And the clear teaching of the life, walk, witness, behaviour of the church of God, walking in love, “striving together for the faith of the gospel,” seeking the Lord’s will, seeking the honour and glory of His name. Well, beloved friends, here you see the early churches walking after the heavenly pattern and being blessed with true, spiritual prosperity.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified.” Wherever the church of God is placed, wherever the church is walking according to the heavenly pattern, there will always be this point of being edified. Perhaps it is a point you do not think much about, or it may be a point you do not count to be of any great or vital importance. But for a long time now I have noticed the very strong emphasis that the Lord lays on this point of edification. In other words, spiritual profit. They were edified. You see, we are encouraged to seek all those things which will edify us. In our personal lives, in our homes and families and circumstances, but especially in the church of God, we are commanded to seek those things which will edify, those things which will be for our spiritual help, those things which will be for our spiritual profit. And we are equally, solemnly commanded to flee from those things which do not edify. There may be things and you cannot altogether say they are wicked or they are wrong, but they are not any real help to you in your spiritual life. They are not any help in your family or in the church of God. In other words, they do not edify.

I take it that is the meaning of the apostle when, speaking of the heavenly race, he says, “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us.” If a man is running in a race, he wears as little as he possibly can, doesn’t he? If he is a business man and he goes to work every day carrying a briefcase, he does not carry that briefcase when he runs the race. There is nothing wrong in carrying a briefcase, but it is a weight. “Let us lay aside every weight.” So there is this emphasis that we are to seek those things which edify, which are a help to us spiritually, in our lives and homes and families, but especially in the church of God. But we have to reject, to flee from everything which does not edify, however right it might be in itself.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified.” There are two sides to this edification in the church of God, wherever there is real blessing, real prosperity. The first is through the preaching of the Word. One great point concerning gospel preaching is that it is to edify you, to be of some help, to be of some profit. Every time you come to chapel, seek that your soul might be edified. And there is something solemnly amiss with preaching if it does not edify. It will not be every time you come to chapel that you will have a clear blessing. It will not be every time you come to chapel that God will powerfully speak to your heart. But do seek this, that when you come to chapel you might be edified. It is a great point, a vital point. The Holy Ghost lays such stress upon it. It is a great point in your spiritual life and spiritual strength, and a great point in the spiritual life and spiritual strength of the church itself. Pray that you might be edified. The Lord puts it like this concerning preaching. I do not know whether you have ever noticed this. He says, it is for “edification, and exhortation, and comfort” – in that order. “Edification, and exhortation, and comfort.” We tend to put the comfort first, don’t we? Perhaps we come to chapel feeling sad and we long to feel comfort, and of course that is right. Or perhaps we come feeling our sinfulness and our guilt. We come to be comforted, and that is right. But the Lord puts it in this order: edification. O seek that you might be edified, that there might be some help, some profit. For edification, and then for exhortation, and finally for comfort.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified.” But, secondly, we have so much in the New Testament concerning the church of God edifying itself and the members of the church edifying one another. First of all, it is through the preaching of the gospel but, secondly, there is so much concerning the church of God edifying itself and the members edifying one another. In love, I feel perhaps this is where we come very far short. Now I appeal to you as a member of the church, do you edify your brethren? I appeal to you as a member of the church, are you edified by your brethren? We have had members of our church who have edified. Their gracious example has edified. Their humility has edified. The way they could speak a word in season, a word of love, a word of comfort, and where needful a word of correction and rebuke, it edified. And also their prayers, how they edified. And then as they yielded their whole lives that they might serve their

brethren in the church, they were such a help in so many ways, and they edified. That is the prosperity of a gospel church.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified.” Now may we be held fast by the Holy Spirit on this point as to whether we edify one another in the body of Christ. I repeat, the Word of God has so much to say on this. You can take one chapter, the fourth chapter to the Ephesians and three times in that chapter the apostle presses this point of edification in the church. First of all, he mentions it concerning preaching. He speaks about the preaching of the everlasting gospel. He says that one great purpose of it is for the edifying of the body of Christ. But then he goes on to this: “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine ... but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ.” Now this is the great verse on the church of God and the members of the church seeking to edify one another: “From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part” – now this is it – “maketh increase of the body unto edifying of itself in love.” And then the third time, towards the end of the chapter, he gives this solemn warning: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying.... And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God.”

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified.” Now may there be this burden, this exercise, this spirit of prayer, that as the body of Christ, the members of His mystical body, the church of God, we might be blessed with much grace to edify one another. What about our example? Does your example edify the body of Christ? Does it edify the young people? Does it edify your children? Does it edify those outside in the street? What about your prayers? Are there those fervent, earnest, burdened prayers that the Lord’s people here might be blessed, built up, established, edified? What about this speaking the word of edification? You know beloved friends, we do not speak sufficiently on the awful, solemn responsibilities of church membership. A person is baptized, received into the church, and sometimes it is as if that is the end. There are the wonderful privileges but also the awful responsibilities, and we do not always walk them out.

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.” Well, do we? “And the Lord hearkened, and heard it.” Does He? “And a book of remembrance was written.” Was it? “For them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels.” Do we seek to edify one another with the word of sweet encouragement? How long is it since you spoke it to someone? Do we seek to edify someone with loving correction and tender rebuke? How long is it since you spoke it to someone? Then above all, being subject to one another, walking together in love, seeking to serve one another in the gospel, seeking to be a help, seeking to go that second mile. This was the witness in the early church which attracted those without and which was the witness in John Kershaw’s church which attracted those without, to see a church edifying one another in love.

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified.” There are just two scriptures I would remind you of. One is this: “Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification.” Now may the Lord seal that in our hearts. “Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification.” And the other: “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.” Now may the Holy Ghost seal that in our hearts. “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.” So here we have this picture of a blessed church, a prosperous church, a church walking in love. “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.”

(If the Lord will, the evening sermon on the same text will be published next month.)