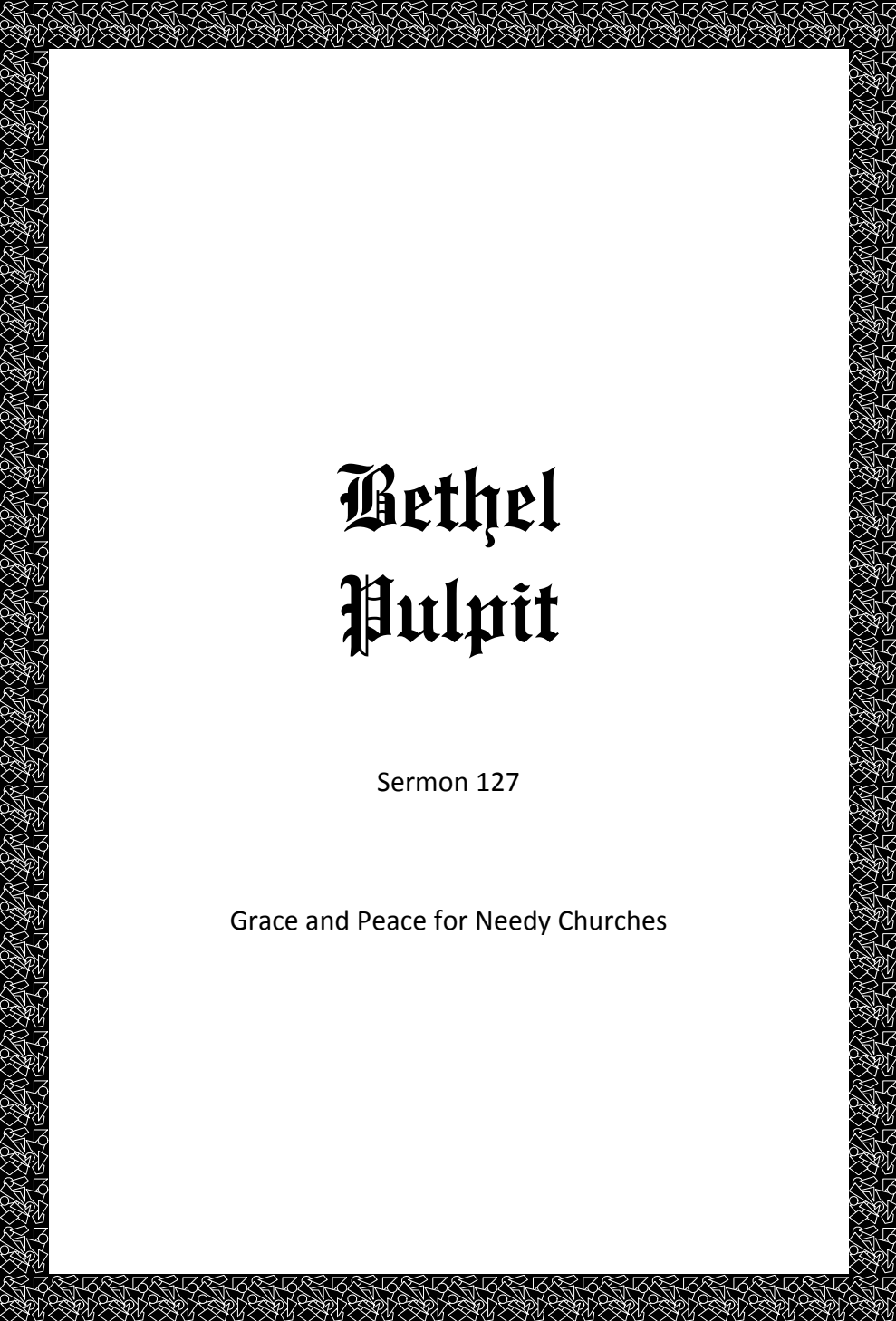




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 127

Grace and Peace for Needy Churches

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 12th November, 1995**

Text: *“John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1. 4-6).*

These verses really are the gateway to this great, mysterious book; and we find them addressed to the seven churches of Asia Minor, which of course are representative of the church of God in all ages, and which are addressed to us also. We read later a lot about these churches. On the one hand, they had some very deep sorrows and very deep trials. On the other hand, they had many faults and failures and sins. But the message of the Lord to them right at the beginning of this book is, “Grace be unto you, and peace.” In other words, whatever they need, it dwells in the Lord Jesus. Whatever they need, it is treasured up there for them. Whatever they need, it is kindly promised to them, and to us. To use the apostle's terminology, unto us, “upon whom the ends of the world are come.”

“John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come.” That is, God the Father. “And from the seven Spirits which are before His throne.” That is, the Holy Ghost. “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth.” That is, God the Son. So as we come right to the end of Holy Scripture, and as we come right to the beginning of this great, this mysterious book, we are reminded of the Three-One God, the holy, sacred, mysterious Trinity; God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost: one God. And all this wonderful fulness of grace and peace that the churches needed then, and that the churches equally or even more need now, all that wonderful fulness of grace and peace treasured up in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The Father appoints it, determines it; the Holy Ghost reveals it, makes it known; the Lord Jesus is the sacred

channel through which all this fulness of blessing flows. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost; one God.

So you see the subject here. It was a solemn time when John wrote. It was a solemn time for John himself, in exile in the island of Patmos, separated from God's people. It was a solemn time for the early church, about the year 96, with these cruel persecutions beginning to threaten them. There was going to be this dreadful conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan. But before we come to all these mysteries of this great book, we have this wonderful revelation: God Himself in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The wonderful fulness of grace and peace; and the church in all its helplessness and need, and yet the wonderful suitability of everything there is in God to meet all these deep needs that are found in sinners.

So you see what the theme is. "John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace." Let us try to look at this word more carefully, bit by bit. First of all, this grace and peace flowing from God the Father. Here He is described as, "Him which is, and which was, and which is to come" – the emphasis there on the eternity of God. He is from everlasting to everlasting. John, the beloved disciple, has the same revelation here of the greatness and the eternity of God as Moses did at the burning bush. Whom shall I say has sent me? "I AM hath sent me." The great, the eternal God. He is, He was, He is to come. It is the eternal God, unchangeable, immutable. With Him there is no variation, nor shadow of turning. He says, "I am the Lord, I change not."

"Him which is, and which was, and which is to come." I believe John had a glimpse of it by faith as he was in the spirit on the Lord's day, that this great, almighty, unchanging God is always there.

"Our lives through various scenes are drawn,
And vexed with trifling cares,
While Thy eternal thought moves on
Thy undisturbed affairs."

He is always there. He is always in control. He is always almighty. "Him which is, and which was, and which is to come." This is the One to whom we pray. This is the One to whom the early church prayed. This is the One who watched over them, helped them, defended them, reproved them in

their sins, upheld them in their trials, this prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God. He is, He was, and He is to come. In the Old Testament He answered His people's prayers. He answered the prayers of Jacob; He answered the prayers of David; He answered the prayers of Hezekiah; He answered the prayers of Jehoshaphat. And then when John was writing this, John knew that He was the One who had answered his prayers, and still did answer his prayers. And the unknown way, "which is to come." We do not know what will be tomorrow. We do not know what will be next week, but we do know this: that the Lord is eternally the same in His blessed ability and willingness to hear and answer prayer.

It is a wonderful start to this great, mysterious book: "Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come." The eternal, unchanging, immutable God, no change in His power. But the point is this: no change in His love. The eternal Father's love is from everlasting to everlasting. To His people, to lost, ruined, guilty sinners, it knows no variation, it knows no change. Have you ever felt a little of His love? "The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love." "They who once His kindness prove, find it everlasting love." There is a blessed bulwark here. There is a rock foundation here. There is something solid, something unchangeable here.

You read through the Book of the Revelation. Let me say this to you young ones. You perhaps find it hard to understand everything; I think most people do. Those who think they know what it all means usually get it all wrong. But really it is all written in picture language. There is this succession of pictures which flash before our eyes one by one. You see angels appearing and beasts and dragons. There is this series of images flashing before our eyes; but a few things stand out. There is a conflict, and the conflict is severe. It may seem that Satan is going to be victorious, but he is a defeated foe. God in Christ will be triumphant. The victory will be His. But it is all prefaced with this glorious view of the great, the unchanging, the omnipotent God. "Which is, and which was, and which is to come." He is the One who appointed all this fulness of grace. He is the One who decreed it for the churches, for His people in all their need.

Then we have God the Holy Ghost. "From the seven Spirits which are before His throne." This, of course, is written in the usual figurative

language of the Book of the Revelation. The number seven is always coming up, the number of completeness, perfection. This is the Holy Spirit in all His wonderful power, and all His gracious workings. "From the seven Spirits which are before His throne." It is the Holy Spirit whose kind office is to take of the things of Jesus and show them to the churches, to communicate this grace and to give this peace. "Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne."

And then God the Son. "And from Jesus Christ." It is in the dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that this wonderful fulness of grace and peace is treasured up. It is through the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that this wonderful fulness of grace and peace flows. "And from Jesus Christ." O with what thoughts of love and affection John must have spoken this word! He was now an aged man. All the other apostles had gone the way of all flesh. It must have been over sixty years since he had walked in fellowship with the Lord Jesus here upon earth. But those days he could never, never forget. Neither does his Lord and Master forget him, because John in his deep sorrow and trial and affliction in Revelation 1 received as good a blessing as ever he received in his early days when he was on earth with the Lord Jesus. There is a point here for you aged ones. Perhaps you look back to those former days. John must have done. Perhaps you say, "Oh that I were as in months past!" Well, the Lord may have a greater blessing in store for you than ever you have had before. But if not on earth, then it must be so in heaven. But those of you who have to say, "Oh that I were as in months past!" when you felt the love of Christ; John must have mourned because he knew those days would never come back again. O but this view he received of the dear Saviour he had known in the flesh, now risen and exalted and glorified! And he heard this word: "Fear not; I am the First and the Last: I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death."

And with what sacred delight it is he writes of Him here! "Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth." He gives us a three-fold description of the Lord Jesus. He tells us three things about Him. Why these three particular things we cannot exactly say, but He is the faithful Witness, that is Christ our Prophet. He is the first begotten of the dead, that is Christ our Priest. He is the Prince of the kings of the earth, that is Christ our King.

The offices of Christ are glorious as Prophet, Priest and King to His people. “The faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth.” Then again the faithful Witness; that specially looks back to when He was here on earth, His sacred life. It was in His life especially He spoke those wonderful words of wisdom and grace. “The faithful Witness.” But then secondly, His death and His resurrection: “the first begotten of the dead.” But then thirdly, His ascension and His exaltation: “the Prince of the kings of the earth.”

Just to pause here for a moment. Later on we have some similar words to those spoken of God the Father spoken also concerning the Lord Jesus, the One who is, and who was, and who is to come. “I am Alpha and Omega,” alpha and omega being the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. As John explains, alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. What the Lord Jesus begins, He will always complete. He will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come.” Then He adds two important words: “The Almighty.” Do you believe it, that “This wondrous Man of whom we tell, is true Almighty God”? The Almighty. And He is revealed here, Jesus, immutably the same. “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.” The same in His love: “Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” The same, the sinner’s only foundation. The same, the sinner’s only plea.

“Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth.” This wonderful, three-fold description of Jesus. He is the faithful Witness. O His faithfulness to His Father; His faithfulness to His unworthy people; His faithfulness to the truth. His faithfulness as a witness, and sealing His witness with His own blood. “The faithful Witness.”

“Great Prophet of my God,
My tongue would bless Thy Name;
By Thee the joyful news
Of our salvation came;
The joyful news of sins forgiven,
Of peace with God, and hope of heaven.”

“Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead.” You see, He died, death being the wages of sin, and He taking His people’s sins upon Himself. So He died that cruel death. He died that sinners might live. He died to shed His precious blood, to make an atonement for sin. He died, but He rose again, taking the sting out of death, and the victory from the grave. He rose triumphant to prove that His death had availed, His sacrifice had been accepted, His blood had atoned.

“The first begotten of the dead.” Some of you may be puzzled by this. Why is the Lord Jesus called the first begotten of the dead, or the first who died, and came back to life? You say, look at the Old Testament; there was the Shunammite’s son with Elisha; there was the widow woman’s son with Elijah; there was the dead body thrown in Elisha’s grave, and that dead body revived. You come to the New Testament: Lazarus, Jairus’ daughter, the son of the widow of Nain; there were a few who had been brought back to life before the Lord Jesus. Why does it call Him the first begotten of the dead? I realise this is perhaps mysterious, but I would answer, for two reasons. For two reasons the Lord Jesus is called the first begotten of the dead. First of all, He was the first one to rise by His own power. The others were raised by the power of another; they had nothing to do with their resurrection. But the Lord Jesus rose by His own power. He says, “No man taketh it (My life) from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” But then, secondly, those others, though they rose from the dead, the day soon came when they died a second time. But not the Lord Jesus. He lives to die no more. “After the power of an endless life.” “The first begotten of the dead.” May we have a glimpse this evening of a dear, living Saviour, the Resurrection and the Life; He who says, “Because I live, ye shall live also.”

“Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth.” He is the Prince of peace, He is the Prince of Life, He is the Prince of the kings of the earth. In other words, He is King of kings, and Lord of lords. He is above all these other monarchs, and principalities, and powers. Their kingdoms one day must perish. His is for ever. You older ones, how many kingdoms can you remember which have ended even during your own lifetime? Before the war there were the foreign stamps that children collected, and they had

the heads of the different kings of all the different countries, and now those kingdoms have gone. They have ended. "In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever." A King and kingdom "that can ne'er decay, when time sweeps earthly thrones away."

Now do not forget this is "John to the seven churches." All this confusion, sorrow, distress; this revelation of the awful conflict; but right at the start the dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ on the throne. Really, you can read through chapter 4 and then chapter 5 and you have such a revelation of the eternal throne of God in heaven, and the Lord Jesus exalted there. Do not forget that He is exalted there, the Prince of the kings of the earth, exalted on His Father's throne, "a Lamb as it had been slain." His precious blood the same efficacy, the same power tonight as the day He died. "Looks like a Lamb that has been slain, and wears His priesthood still." O but before there is anything else, "John to the seven churches which are in Asia ... the Prince of the kings of the earth." And then in Revelation 4 and 5, there is the sweet opening up of it. They had this view that it was not Satan in control, not wicked men in control, not the cruel emperor Diocletian in control, but the government must be upon His shoulder, and He must reign till every enemy shall be beneath His feet. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." May you and I see it tonight, that the exalted Saviour is on the throne, that He is the Prince of the kings of the earth. May there be that sweet realisation for ourselves and for those we love, "My times are in Thy hand." "All must come, and last, and end, as shall please My heavenly Friend." Nothing by accident, nothing by chance. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord." He waits that He may be gracious.

"And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth." Well, this wonderful revelation! It is no wonder this book is called "The Revelation." Strictly speaking, it ought not to be called what our translators called it, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine." The title the Holy Ghost gave it is, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him." But this wonderful revelation of the Trinity in unity, of this grace and of this peace, that the seven churches of Asia Minor needed so much, and that you and I so painfully feel our need of tonight. In these

churches there was much sorrow and tribulation and anguish and distress. But this wonderful fulness of grace with the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, this all-sufficiency of grace, this fulness of grace, this abundance of grace to the churches in all their deep sorrow. “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” And then there were so many faults and failures and sins in the seven churches, and there are today. O but this grace and peace! “Plenteous grace in Thee is found, grace to cover all our sin.” Now, what a subject, what a theme! Do not forget these were real churches, and they had real troubles and real needs and real sorrows. But the Lord points out the place where grace abounds, appointed, given by the Father, divinely communicated by the Holy Spirit, and all flowing through Christ.

“Grace be unto you, and peace.” Don’t we feel our need of grace? Grace to uphold us and keep us, grace to supply our need, grace when things go wrong, grace in the hour of trial and sorrow and disappointment, grace to forgive, grace to cleanse. O we need grace in such a multitude of ways. But here it is revealed in all its fulness, “Grace be unto you.” He wishes it to the churches. But beloved friends, it is more than this. There is a promise of it to the churches, “Grace be unto you.” The wonderful fulness. May you and I prove it. “And of His fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.” In all our wretched emptiness and ruin and need, to prove this word true. “Grace be unto you, and peace” – in that order. Grace bringing peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace communicating that peace made by the blood of His cross. Grace giving you that peace of conscience, that peace of heart, despite all your concerns and worries and sorrows and needs. But you say,

“Peace, perfect peace, the future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.”

O this blessing, “Grace be unto you, and peace.” It is the usual apostolic greeting, but it is more than that. “Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, the Prince of the Kings of the earth.”

Then we have faith’s response, the outbreking into this doxology of praise: “Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His

own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” I am not going to attempt an exposition of these exceedingly-beautiful words. There is so much in them. Really, if they were opened to us, if we were led into them, we should be here until past midnight. There is such a fulness here, the “fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ.” But it is the spirit of it. May you and I know something of the spirit of it. “Unto Him.” That is, Jesus Christ. Unto Him, who is the Mediator of the covenant through which all these blessings flow, through which grace and mercy and peace flow. Unto Him, of whom we sing,

“In Him my treasure’s all contained;
By Him my feeble soul’s sustained;
From Him I all things now receive;
Through Him my soul shall ever live.”

“Unto Him.” O to get these two words in your heart, to raise your affections heaven-ward, to take away your hardness, to melt your heart, to melt you in tears. Unto Him that loved us with an everlasting love from all eternity, a love that had no beginning, a love that can never end, a love so undeserved, a love to the vilest of sinners, the chief of sinners, a love that caused Him to leave heaven for earth. “Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.”

“Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood.” Now I know that this is what some of you want to know, and want to feel. But may you be able to urge that prayer which seems to have been with us quite a lot recently:

“The fountain open stands,
Yet on its brink I dwell;
O put me in with Thy own hands,
And that will make me well.”

That is the way into the experience of the reality. The Lord will not be displeased with such a prayer, a plea as this. He will not fail to answer it. “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” It is only those led and taught by the Spirit who are ever taught to pray this prayer. Your flesh did not teach you it, Satan did

not teach you it, and if the Lord has taught you this prayer, He will answer it.

“Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood.” There is something so solemn, so sacred there. We think of the blood of lambs and bulls and goats and calves. It was impossible that these could ever put away sin. But this is His own blood.

“Richly flowed the crimson river,
Down Emmanuel’s lovely side;
And that blood will you deliver,
Whensoever ’tis applied.”

“His own blood.” “Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins.” The margin gives it, “loosed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father.” Here it is putting the crown on the Saviour’s head, holy gratitude. “To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” There is nothing more to be said. Amen, so let it be. Amen, so shall it be. “Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”