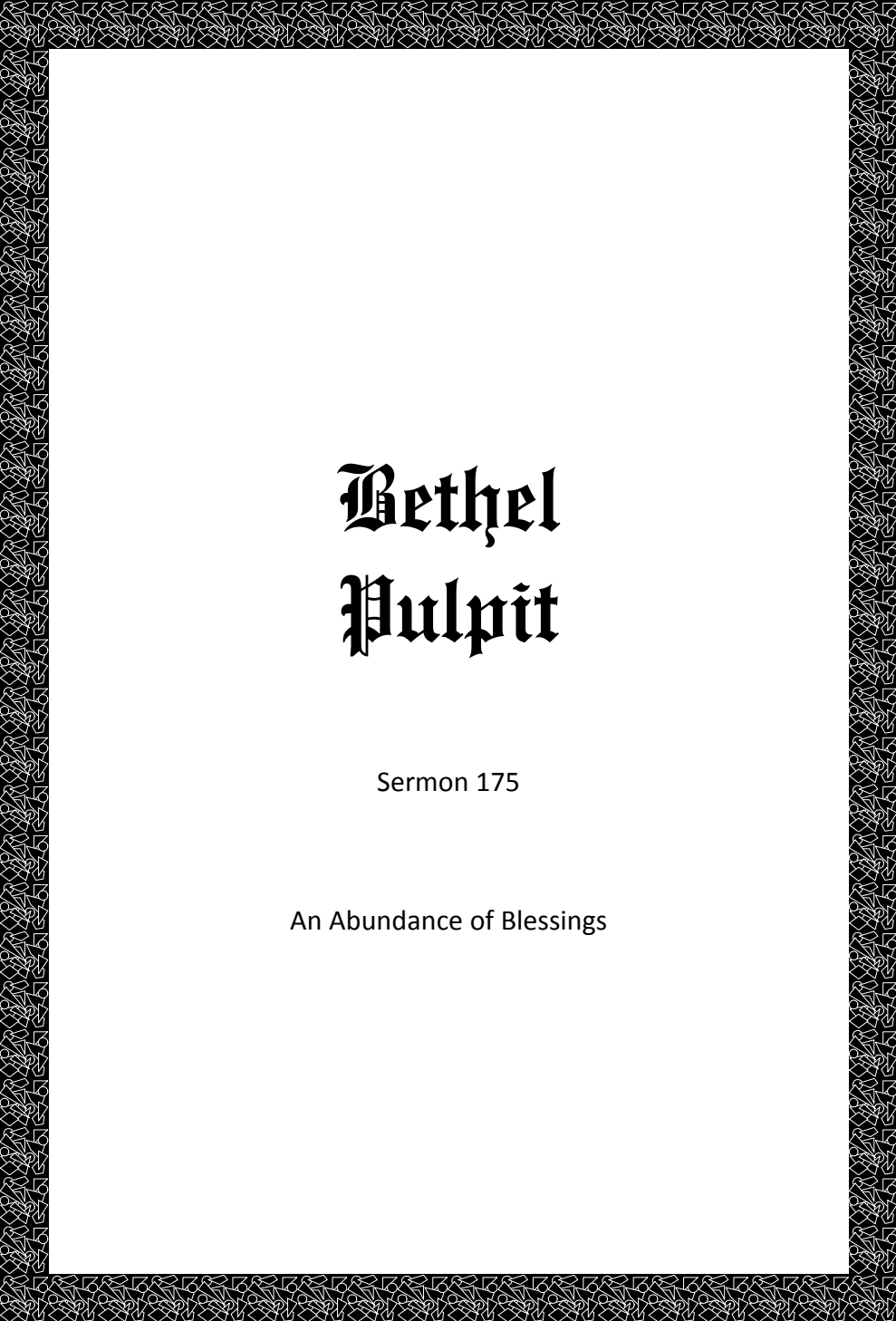




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 175

An Abundance of Blessings

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 19th September, 1999**

Text: *“Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest Mine” (Ezekiel 16. 8).*

This is a most remarkable passage of God's Word. In most striking and figurative language, the Lord describes His dealings with His ancient people, and also His dealings with the church of God down to the end of time. If you look at it literally, His dealings with Abraham, bringing him out and then making Israel a nation, blessing them, bringing them into the land of Canaan. O but the beauties there are in this passage! Here the church of God is described as an infant thrown out in the day of its birth, loathsome in its own blood, none eye caring, lying there in the open field to die. And the Lord says, “And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live” (verse 6). And that is the beginning of all real religion, when the Lord in His love and mercy passes by and when He sees us there in all our sin, guilt and shame, loathsome in our sins and blood, deserving to be cut off, to be trampled under foot, but in love and mercy He says unto us, “Live.” That is the beginning of all real religion, when the Lord blesses with divine life, when the Lord blesses with eternal life. Now how many of you have that sweet hope that the Lord in love and mercy has passed by and found you in all your ruin, guilt and shame, loathsome in your sins and blood, and instead of the sentence of death, it has been the sentence of everlasting life? “I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.”

“When loathsome in thy sins and blood,
He did thy state survey,
And for a stranger Surety stood;
He hates to put away.”

“I ... saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood,

Live.” That is the beginning of the work of grace. That is salvation. In the beautiful verse I have read to you, *this* is the bestowing of the blessings of everlasting salvation through grace on this sinner who has been found in unregeneracy, who has been found in sin and guilt and shame, who has been quickened into life, who has been made to live. Now, “When I passed by thee.” If you will, this is a second passing by. With some, it is a long time between that first passing by and that second passing by; when He says, “Live,” and when He makes known these wonderful blessings of mercy. With some, it is only a short time, and with some, in love and mercy it all happens at once. But one thing is clear: as surely as you are in verse 6, you will come into verse 8. In other words, as surely as the Lord has found you where you are and said, “Live,” so surely will He bless you with the blessings of His salvation.

“Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love.” O what a wonderful thing is the time of love! Of course really, right at the beginning when the Lord finds a sinner in his guilt and shame and quickens him into life and says unto him, “Live,” that is a time of love, though the sinner at that time does not feel it. But this is when the sinner is sweetly brought into the knowledge of Christ and the experience of His love and the receiving of the blessings of the gospel. “Behold, thy time was the time of love.” Now there are quite a few of you here this morning and you can look back to your time of love. O how sacred the memory of it still! With some of you, it was many, many years ago. With some of you younger ones, it was more recently. “Behold, thy time was the time of love,” when the Lord drew near and He came right where you were and He made Himself known, revealed Himself, made Himself precious. You felt the wonders of His love, and you loved Him in return, and He was your only hope, your only plea, all your salvation, and the world was absolutely nothing to you.

“Behold, thy time was the time of love.” Now that is the best time in the life of a child of God, when “thy time was the time of love.” Of course, sometimes the Lord repeats that time of love, sometimes again and again in the life and experience of His people. “Behold, thy time was the time of love.” We have known that time of love here at Bethel, haven’t we? Our mind goes back to some of those wonderful occasions, some thirteen years ago, some twenty years ago, and some more recently, when

in this honoured, favoured sanctuary it was the time of love. And how often at the church meetings,

“With wonder we attend,
While they the sinner’s Friend,
With tears of holy joy, extol.”

Behold, it was the time of love, and what we long for is again here at Bethel to know the time of love, and what we long for is for some of you who have never known that time of love sweetly to experience it. But I would say this, those of you have been brought to feel your need of Christ, to seek after Him, to feel you cannot do without Him:

“The time of love will come,
When you shall clearly see,
Not only that He shed His blood,
But each shall say, ‘*For me.*’”

“Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.” “Behold, thy time was the time of love.”

“Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love.” Now has the Lord ever looked upon you, looked upon you in love and mercy, looked upon you in a way of divine favour, looked upon you and blessed you? O has He ever looked upon you from the cross? Has He ever looked upon you as He looked upon Simon Peter? “And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter.” O that look condemned him, but that look forgave him. Do you know that look of Christ that condemns you for your vileness, sin and guilt? And do you know that second look which says, “I freely all forgive”?

“A second look He gave, which said,
‘I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom paid;
I die that thou may’st live.’”

“Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love.” And then there are some of you who make it a prayer. This morning if you cannot attain to these blessings, make it a prayer. That beautiful prayer: “Look Thou upon me, and be merciful unto me, as Thou usest to do unto those that love Thy name.”

“Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love.” And then in this verse and the verses that follow (shall I say?) you have a profusion of blessings, an abundance of blessings. I do not know of any verse or verses in Scripture which more abound with the blessings of the Lord. The only one which in any way comes near it, I think, is that one: “But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” O the fulness in some of these verses! We speak sometimes of “the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ.” Now here you have it, “the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ.” It is just one blessing after another, because it is the time of love.

There are two things that stand out. One thing is that these blessings were completely undeserved, entirely on the ground of mercy; and the other, that the Lord Jesus does it all. This poor sinner does not do a single thing. The Lord Jesus does it all, gives it all, provides it all. O what rich provision we have here! “I spread My skirt over thee.” Divine protection. He claimed her as His own. He entered into the marriage relationship. “I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness.”

Well, there is so much in these verses. One is this: “Then washed I thee with water” (verse 9). Here she is in all her sin and guilt and shame, and there is that cleansing from all sin, that cleansing from all guilt in the blood of Christ. Now this is what every one of us needs, and this is what the Lord does in mercy for His people, and this is what He makes known to them personally when it is the time of love, that cleansing in the blood of Christ. “Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” Thoroughly washed away, thy sin; thy guilt thoroughly washed away. “I anointed thee with oil.” The graces, the anointing of the Holy Spirit of God which is in Christ without measure and in His people in measure, and is especially known in that sealing time when “thy time was the time of love.”

“I ... covered thy nakedness.” The people of God in the work of salvation need two things doing for them. God demands a perfect, spotless righteousness from every sinner who has ever lived, in obedience to His holy law. You and I were all born under the law, and God demands that

perfect obedience, that perfect, spotless righteousness. We cannot provide it – we are sinners – but God has the right to demand it as our Creator, and God does demand it, that absolute, perfect, spotless righteousness. Well, here we are like Joshua the high priest in Zechariah 3. We are standing before a holy God and we are clothed with filthy garments. What did Joshua need that he might be acceptable? Well, he needed those filthy garments to be taken away and to be washed, but he would still be naked. Then he would need to be clothed in those beautiful garments. That is what Christ does for His people when it is the time of love. He not only cleanses them from their filthiness and guilt and removes their rags, but clothes them in that spotless, pure robe of His own righteousness. That is the only way you and I can ever get to heaven. Here we are, sinners, rebels, law breakers, guilty, unclean. One day we shall stand before the judgment seat of a holy, holy, holy God, and the only way we can find acceptance is to be completely washed in the blood of Christ, and to be completely covered with the beautiful, spotless, pure, white robes of Christ's righteousness.

You say, "What does this mean really? This is figurative language." What it really means is this: that holy, spotless life that the Lord Jesus lived while here on earth is reckoned to your account just as though you had lived that life yourself. These things seem almost too high for us, but this is the gospel. This holy, spotless, pure life of Jesus here on earth in obedience to His Father's law is reckoned to the sinner's account as though he himself had lived that life. And it is spoken of as a robe, a garment. It is not something that grows on us by nature. It is something that God must put on. We have so much in Scripture about the robe of righteousness.

"Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head."

"I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness." That perfect covering of a lost, ruined, guilty sinner in the spotless obedience and righteousness of Christ, and that is what the Lord makes known to you when it is the time of love.

I think I have been meditating on this verse for over forty years, probably over fifty years. I do not think any of us will ever really get to the bottom of it, these glorious truths that are here set forth. But after this verse, there are so many things. “I clothed thee also with brodered work, and shod thee with badgers’ skin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk. I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a jewel on thy forehead” (verses 10, 11, 12) – and so it goes on. I think Matthew Henry as a commentator is usually wise. He said, “I do not think we should be too careful in trying to make each of these things means something.” He said, “The whole picture is of one who was once an outcast and a stranger now shining in beauty and glory.” All these things are a figure of beauty and glory. Matthew Henry says, “Do not be too careful in trying to interpret each little bit and trying to make it mean something.” I think that is a great point in reading the Word of God, especially with some of the things in the Song of Solomon, and especially with some of the parables. But this sinner, completely lost and ruined and guilty in self, but standing complete in Christ, completely saved, completely washed, completely justified. You see here the church of God in all her beauty. “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” Not in her forlorn condition, cast out in her loathsomeness and blood as in the days of her nativity, but as she stands in Christ. “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” Here she is in all her glory.

But now the conclusion of it is this: Almighty God says, Thou wast “perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee” (verse 14). Now that belongs to the whole church of God. It belongs to every sinner saved by grace. You say, “It is a bit high for me.” Beloved friends, if you do not possess this, you will never get to heaven. “Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee.” Not all God’s people have the full, high, sweet assurance of it. But in the reality, they must possess it. It must be their only hope, because when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, it is only those who are perfect who can enter heaven, and in themselves none are perfect, but ruined, undone, unclean. The Lord said, Thou wast “perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God.” Nothing in the sinner but sin, guilt and shame, and nothing in the Saviour but those perfections. It is everything in Christ.

“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee.” It is there that a holy God looks on a guilty sinner and says, “Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee.” “Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee.”

Perhaps some of you feel the opposite. You feel the sin, the guilt, the defilement. May you be able to come on mercy’s ground and say, “Lord Jesus, I have no comeliness of my own, but do put Thy comeliness upon me.” In other words, “I have no hope. This is my only plea. This is my foundation. O put Thy comeliness upon me.” Really it is this: “In Christ’s obedience clothe, and wash me in His blood.” That is the sinner’s preparation for heaven, to be brought to renounce your own comeliness, your own righteousness, to see yourself as an unclean sinner, your righteousness as filthy rags, and then like the apostle, “Not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”

“The best obedience of my hands
Dares not appear before Thy throne;
But faith can answer Thy demands,
By pleading what my Lord has done.”

And beloved friends, this is the gospel as I understand it, and the wonderful thing is there is such hope for a sinner who feels his lost, ruined condition, who feels he cannot do anything because Christ must do it all. O but to see no beauty in yourself, and then to see that wonderful beauty in Christ, because we have the promise that the Lord will give “beauty for ashes.” What does that mean? Well, He will burn up all your own beauty and comeliness under the law. It will all be consumed. And then He will give you the beauty of Christ’s righteousness in the place of the ashes of your own. But there are some wonderful truths here. May it be the time of love. May the Lord in love and mercy make it known to you longing, seeking souls. “When I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness.” “Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee.”

I said that I do not think it is wise to enquire too carefully into the meaning of all these various clauses and phrases here, but there are one or two that stand out, and perhaps I should just hint at them. “I clothed thee also with brodered work” (verse 10). You know what embroidery is.

Really, it is painstaking work. It takes a lot of time, and it all has to be done stitch by stitch. Well, the robe of Christ's righteousness is embroidery. If you will, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ worked it out while here on earth in His sacred life stitch by stitch. So in Psalm 45: "She shall be brought unto the King in raiment of needlework." "I clothed thee also with brodered work." "I girded thee about with fine linen." In the Revelation, we read of the marriage supper of the Lamb, "and His wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." "I girded thee about with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk." And that, both then and now, speaks of something which is really valuable. At one time silk was counted a most precious thing. Well, what can you say concerning the preciousness of the Lord Jesus and the preciousness of the adornments He put on His people and the preciousness of that robe of righteousness? But then, beloved friends, something here seems absolutely incongruous: "And shod thee with badgers' skin." Here she was, perfect, clothed in fine linen and silk and brodered work, and her shoes are badgers' skins. It is almost like a bride and she is wearing hiking boots! Well, badgers' skin was very hard-wearing. I take it the point here is: the bride, while she is here below, still needs these badgers' skin shoes; or in another place it is the shoes of iron and brass. Why? Because the pathway is going to be hard and rugged, and all her beauty and glory in Christ will not excuse her from that. She has to walk out that rugged road that leads to heaven. "I ... shod thee with badgers' skin" – shoes that will not wear out until you walk the heavenly streets and do not need them any longer.

Well, there are some wonderful things here. "Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee." The covenant of grace was made between the eternal Father and Christ in eternity past and in that everlasting covenant there is every blessing, every favour, every promise, everything a guilty sinner ever needs. It is all of grace, and ordered in all things and sure. But when the time of love comes in your life, the Lord really brings you into the blessings of the covenant. He makes the blessings of the covenant of grace known to you.

“Here the vast seas of grace,
Love, peace, and mercy flow,
That all the blood-bought race
Of men, or angels know:
O sacred deep, without a shore,
Who shall thy limits e’er explore?”

Now that covenant stood from all eternity. But when it is the time of love and the Lord makes Himself known and precious to you, then personally it is confirmed with the solemn oath of God and confirmed with the blood of Christ; He personally enters into that covenant with you and you are bound up secure in the covenant of grace ordered in all things and sure.

There are inestimable blessings here. There is such a profusion of blessings and it seems the last one seals them all: “Thou becamest Mine.” Thou, a lost, ruined, guilty sinner becamest Mine and Mine eternally, Mine for ever. This is the Lord Jesus taking possession of a guilty sinner in love and blood and making that sinner His own. If you will, there is the marriage union here. It is the time of love. It is “the day of His espousals ... the day of the gladness of His heart.” I used to look at that text in the Song of Solomon years ago; I could see such a beauty in it: “The day of His espousals ... the day of the gladness of His heart.” It is an incredible thing that when this dear Saviour unites with a lost, ruined, guilty sinner, it is the day of the gladness of His heart. Not just *her* heart; *His* heart. He sees of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied. You remember how beautifully Toplady speaks of this in his diary. A sixteen-year-old boy wandering into a barn in Ireland, hearing a preacher who could hardly write his own name, and the text was, “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” He said, “It was the day of my sensible espousals to the Bridegroom of God’s elect.” Thou, a lost, ruined sinner; thou, so unworthy; thou, so prone to wander; “thou becamest Mine,” Mine for ever, Mine eternally.

And really the rest of the chapter is a beautiful commentary on this: “And thou becamest Mine.” There are such sordid details in this chapter. In Victorian England, they would not read the whole of Ezekiel 16 through in the pulpit. It speaks of you and me in our wanderings, the backslidings of our heart, our forgetfulness of our Saviour, our rebellion against Him, the awful sin and guilt and envy and pride and lust. It sets forth you and

me. But the point is this: still Mine. “Thou becamest Mine.” “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.” And so you have these sordid details, the church of God wandering into sin and guilt and shame. But the Lord Jesus says, still Mine. “I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.” Still Mine. So just before you come to the end of the chapter, “Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with thee in the days of thy youth” (verse 60). He is taking her right back again through this beautiful eighth verse: “I ... entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest Mine.” “Nevertheless I will remember My covenant.” “Not all the wanderings of her heart can make His love from her depart.” “Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with thee in the days of thy youth.” “And I will establish My covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord” (verse 62). There is only one thing we can say. Mercy must be free. Grace must be free. “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” “Thou becamest Mine” – Mine for ever, Mine eternally.

Of course, when we think of Ezekiel 16, we always think of William Gadsby. When he was a boy, the Lord abundantly blessed him and these opening verses (though he did not know the chapter at that time) absolutely described his experience of the grace of God, but he became a little bit proud and self-sufficient and the Lord left him to fall into sin. In black despair, he thought there was no hope for him, but in the end providentially the Lord led him and he opened at Ezekiel chapter 16. He read these opening verses and thought, “This is me.” These were the blessings he had had. And then in the middle, those sordid things, he thought, “This is me.” And he could not wait to get to the end. He kept saying, “If this one is saved, I will get to heaven; but if this one is lost, I will be lost.” When he came to this: “Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with thee in the days of thy youth,” he could not forbear shouting out, “I am saved! I am saved!” And he felt despite his backsliding and wandering, heaven would be his at last.

“And I will establish My covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: that thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God.” Well, grace must be free indeed.

“Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest Mine.”