

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 208

The Lord Bless Thee

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 30th December, 2001**

Text: *“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (Numbers 6. 24-26).*

I always feel this is a solemn time, when we come to the end of another year. We have now reached the last Lord's day of the old year, and we trust it is upheld by the Lord's supporting hand that we do pass from one year to the next. It has been a year of judgment and of mercy. “With mercy and with judgment, my web of time He wove.” We have many things for which to be thankful; we have many things of which to be ashamed.

As we pass from one year to the next, the world is in a dreadful state. Our country is in a dreadful state. The churches are in a dreadful state. Our hope is that the Lord reigneth, that He is still on the throne, that the government is upon His shoulder, that all our times are in His hand. There are many of you with your varying concerns, some over your sins and your souls and eternity; some over things in your lives, your families, your circumstances, your health. To many, perhaps, the new year seems like a great, black mountain that looms up before you as you think of one thing and another. Perhaps especially some of you wonder if the next year may be your last.

Well, beloved friends, this is my desire for each of you as my congregation and this is my prayer for you: “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Now I can wish you nothing better than this. I can pray for you nothing better than this. I trust also that this is your desire and your prayer for me as your Pastor. I thought of how Boaz went into the fields of Bethlehem and there were the reapers and he said to them, “The Lord be with you. And they answered him, The Lord bless thee.” I trust it is with that spirit every Lord's day morning we begin the services, though unspoken, as I come into the pulpit with that prayerful desire, “The Lord be with you,” and as you assemble to hear the everlasting gospel, “The Lord bless thee.”

Now these are wonderful words, sacred words, often used as a kind of benediction at the close of the services, so suitable for the end of the year and the beginning of the next. It almost seems it is wrong to comment on them because the words in themselves are a blessing. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”

In two things I am going to deviate from the way in which these words have usually been considered. Now one is this. You will find that so many of the old writers say this was a time when everything was right in Israel, everything was in order; then in this chapter in the Book of Numbers comes the vow of the Nazarite, commitment to the Lord; and then, and only then, “The Lord bless thee.” I felt, that is perhaps not so good for those of us who feel so unworthy and to come so far short. I cannot preach this blessing to you today on law ground. The Lord spoke this to Moses, but He did not say Moses was to speak this. It was Aaron. Aaron had to speak this blessing. It is not the law; it is the gospel that blesses. If you and I know anything of these blessings today and in the new year, it will be on the ground of grace, not of law. The Lord *does* call His people to gracious separation, but it is not on that ground He blesses them. He blesses them as sinners for Jesus’ sake. Whenever you read of a sinner being blessed, always remember the foundation of it, that unspeakable word: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ.” For every blessing, every grace and every favour come to us through Jesus’ blood. So from many who have written, perhaps more than spoken, on these verses I deviate. They put it almost as if this was a reward of Israel’s consecration.

Now the second thing. I should have liked to have preached from the Trinity in this text. Many people do apply it to the Trinity for obvious reasons. It is a threefold blessing and the name of the Lord is mentioned three times. But as I was trying to look at it and meditate on it, I could not see how especially verse 24 belonged to the Father, and verse 25 to the Son, and verse 26 to the Holy Ghost. Mind you, all blessings are the blessings of the Trinity. The Father has treasured up all blessings in Christ and those blessings are made known to sinners by the Holy Ghost.

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Now I trust this is my desire for you and your desire for me. I have thought also like this: our desire in the congregation one for another. O beloved friends, I do hope as a congregation we do pray one for another. There are those in trouble. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” There are the children, the little ones. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” There are those who are seeking the Lord’s face. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” There are those with no concern. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” I would that there might be that spirit, and I am not just thinking of in secret. Perhaps you see someone walk into chapel on the Lord’s day morning and your heart goes right out toward them. Or perhaps you see someone outside. “The Lord bless thee and keep thee.”

I would say this. I am burdened that those of you who have openly professed the Lord’s name should be able to speak more openly of what the Lord has done for you, and especially at the close of services and outside chapel might be able to speak more to one and another in a way of encouragement or in a way of reproof. A person was talking to me only this week at Bethesda about how their spiritual beginnings were when someone just spoke a simple word of exhortation and warning outside chapel and that was the arrow. I think it was that someone said to this young man, “How are you?” He said, “I am alright.” The answer was this: “None of us are alright.” That was the arrow. Now may we be able to speak more one to another. May the spirit of bondage be removed. But may there be that desire, yes, also in secret, and at our prayer meetings; I often feel it like this. Someone flashes across my spirit. O, “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” Very often as I am preaching, as I look round the chapel on one and another, “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” It would be a wonderful thing if there was that praying one for another. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” For beloved friends, we can wish nothing better for one and another and for ourselves than the blessing of the Lord which maketh rich and to which He addeth no sorrow. But may there be that spirit one towards another as we meet and as we see one another: “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.”

They tell me that years ago at the old Coventry prayer meetings, one of the aged deacons, when he had to preside at the prayer meeting, used to take his seat at the front of the chapel an hour before the prayer

meeting began, and he sat there with his head down praying for the Lord's blessing on the people in the congregation, until the time came for the people to arrive. Then he lifted his head up and as he saw one and another arrive and go to their places, he used to breathe out a prayer like this: "The Lord bless thee." May there be more of that spirit amongst us for one another. "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

Blessings of providence and blessings of grace. Now, "The Lord bless thee" in providence. I think the expression that we have in these early books of the Bible is the Lord blessing them *in basket and in store*. Now may the Lord bless you in providence, in your homes and lives and families and circumstances, in the church of God, at home and at work. Now, "The Lord bless thee" in providence. And then, "The Lord bless thee" in grace. We think of how Jabez prayed, and he was a child of sorrow. Jabez prayed, "Oh that Thou wouldest bless me indeed!" Not just being delivered out of my sorrow, or helped in my sorrow, but, "Oh that Thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast" – give me a blessing I have never had before, Lord. "That Thine hand might be with me" – not against me, to "keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!" That it may not grieve Thee, Lord, and may not grieve me. "And God granted him that which he requested." Now, "The Lord bless thee" in providence, but, "The Lord bless thee" in grace. "The Lord bless thee" with these *indeed* blessings. Our hymnwriter asks the question, and then he most graciously answers it:

"What is it to be blest indeed,
But to have all our sins forgiven;
To be from guilt and terror freed,
Redeemed from hell, and sealed for heaven;
To worship an incarnate God,
And know He saved us by His blood?"

Now that is to be blessed indeed. And if the Lord answers this prayer, "The Lord bless thee," and if He blesses you indeed, then you will be "Naphtali, satisfied with favour, and full with the blessing of the Lord."

"The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace." Now we can only desire it and we can

only pray for it, but the Lord in love and mercy can command it, and the Lord can give it. Now no sinner can command the blessing. It is, “There *the Lord* commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.” One of the friends in one of the Dutch churches in America asked me a question. He said, “When you pronounce the benediction, why do you not lift up your hands in blessing the people?” And my answer was very simple: Because I have not any power to bless the people. Only Almighty God can bless them. All that a minister can do is pray for God’s blessing, seek God’s blessing.

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” But the great thing is to pray for these blessings *for ourselves*, to pray for these blessings personally. Many people have rested on the prayers of the minister for them. Many people have presumed on the prayers of their godly parents for them. Now you will never get to heaven unless you are taught by the Spirit of God to pray for yourself, to seek the blessing for yourself, to ask for the blessing for yourself. Lord, bless *me* and keep *me*. Lord, make Thy face shine upon *me*, and be gracious unto *me*. Lord, lift up Thy countenance upon *me*, and give *me* peace. Now it is a wonderful thing to have an interest in the prayers of the Lord’s people, but never rest upon it, never presume upon it.

You know the well-known story which I have told you before, of dear old Mr. Ben Field down in Kent, Mr. Robert Field’s grandfather. He was the black sheep of the family. He belonged to a large family and it seemed nearly all of them were blessed. His brother Joseph was an eminent minister. His brother Jabez, the Pastor at Blackboys, was an eminent minister. He had a most godly wife, but he spent most of his time in the public house. He said he was sure he would get to heaven because his wife was so godly and she told him how she had to wrestle in prayer for him day and night. This went on until he was an old man, and one day his wife said to him, “Ben, I have something to say to you.” He said, “What is it?” She said, “I am never going to pray for you any more!” It was like an arrow in his heart. He groaned over his sins night and day and realised he had been resting on his wife’s prayers. In his old age, the Lord most blessed him. He was a most godly, gracious man, and some of us remember him being baptized as an aged man. He joined the church at Cranbrook.

It is a wonderful thing if the Lord's people pray for us, but you cannot rest upon the prayers of another. If your religion is real, you will be taught to pray for yourself. You will be taught to pray, Lord bless *me* and keep *me*. Lord, make Thy face shine upon *me*, and be gracious unto *me*. Lord, lift up Thy countenance upon *me*, and give *me* peace. And the blessing – well you will want to be blessed with this great salvation. You will want to be blessed with this vital, personal, saving knowledge of Christ. You will be like that one in the Old Testament who said, “Give me a blessing.” You will be like that one who said to his father, “Bless *me*, even *me*,” and nothing else will do. O it will be those blessings that flow from the cross of Christ that you will seek, but you will have to pray for them personally. Lord, bless me, even me. All those blessings which flow from the cross of Christ.

“Pardon and grace, and boundless love,
Streaming along a Saviour's blood;
And life, and joy, and crowns above,
Obtained by a dear bleeding God.”

Lord, bless me, even me. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”

Now this word, this blessing, was upon the Israel of God. They were a pilgrim people. At this time they were on pilgrimage, they were on a journey, they were in the wilderness. And we too are in the wilderness, the wilderness of this world. If your religion and mine is real, we shall realise that this world *is* just a barren, waste-howling wilderness. If we belong to the true Israel, we shall have been brought out of the Egypt of this world and we shall have to confess that we are pilgrims and strangers in this waste-howling wilderness. And as the year comes to an end, we are specially reminded that we are on pilgrimage. This is not our rest; it is polluted. We trust this morning we can say, “We are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you: come thou with us, and we will do thee good: for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.” Now it is spoken to a pilgrim people. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” “The Lord bless thee,” as you journey through this wilderness.

Now you all must have noticed that this wonderful blessing which was spoken by Israel's high priest was spoken personally. It was not, the Lord bless *you*. There were thousands of Israelites, but it is put in the singular, *thee*. Why is it put as if it is just one? Well, for two reasons. I just mention the first; I want to linger more on the second. In the sight of a holy God, His Israel is one. "The Lord bless *thee*, and keep *thee*" – one Israel. There is just *one* church; there is just *one* body; there is just *one* spiritual building. The oneness of the whole church of God in Christ. Thee, the bride, one, united to the heavenly Bridegroom. *Thee*. "The Lord bless *thee*, and keep *thee*: the Lord make His face shine upon *thee*, and be gracious unto *thee*: the Lord lift up His countenance upon *thee*, and give *thee* peace."

But there is a second reason, and I want to linger on this more because it seems so attractive, so beautiful to me. As the Lord looks down upon His beloved people in Christ, He does not just see them as one great mass. He sees them one by one. *Thee*. *Thee*, as you are there sitting in your seat this morning. The love, the everlasting love of God to His people in Christ! It is to *thee*. It is to that sinner personally. Now that is the blessing. The Lord bless *thee* personally, as if there was none other that ever lived. "I have loved *thee*" – such a sinner as *thee* – "I have loved *thee* with an everlasting love." When the Lord hung bleeding, dying on the cross, He loved you and thought of you personally as if there were none other that had ever lived – *thee* – when He saw of the travail of His soul and He was satisfied. I believe when He cried, "It is finished," He did not just see the whole blood-bought church of God: He viewed each one individually, you here this morning for whom He died. "It is finished." And He saw of the travail of His soul and He was satisfied. He says, "Fear not: for I have redeemed *thee*, I have called *thee* by *thy* name; *thou* art Mine." It is personal. The blessing of the Lord is personal.

"The Lord bless *thee*, and keep *thee*." That one here this morning so fearful about the new year, the coming days, *thee*. "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee." That little child in the Sunday School, "The Lord bless *thee*, and keep *thee*." That teacher in the Sunday School, so burdened and concerned, "The Lord bless *thee*, and keep *thee*." That one mourning over your hard heart, "The Lord bless *thee*" with a soft heart. That one so burdened in prayer, "The Lord bless *thee*" with answers to prayer. That one so concerned about others you love, the children in your family, "The Lord bless *thee*." That one worried about your health, *thee*, "The Lord

bless *thee*.” O can’t you see it, just how beautiful it is, how personal! The blessing of the Lord, *thee*. That one in trouble, that one in sorrow, “The Lord bless *thee*.” That one seeking to know the Lord’s will, “The Lord bless *thee*.” That one feeling to lack wisdom to direct your way, “The Lord bless *thee*.” That one dead in trespasses and sins, “The Lord bless *thee*” with a real concern. That one seeking after Jesus, “The Lord bless *thee*,” that thou mayest find Him. It is so personal.

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” As Gadsby puts it, “Whatever be your state or case, the Lord Himself be near.” “The Lord lift up His countenance upon *thee*, and give *thee* peace.” It is that loving, personal interest of the heavenly Father in His people in Christ, His loving, tender, merciful, gracious concern. Every detail of your life, your joys, your sorrows, whatever it is, wherever you are, whatever rests upon you, whatever be your burden this morning, *thee*. “Commit thy way unto the Lord.” *Thee*. “Cast thy burden upon the Lord.” *Thee*.

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Well, beloved friends, as we come to the end of the year, may we know something of these blessings, and may we know these blessings in the new year, in our church and congregation, in our homes and lives and families, and personally, in our pilgrimage through this wilderness. O, “The Lord bless *thee*, and keep *thee*.” Gadsby says, “The Father has in Jesus stored all blessings for the poor.” And Paul says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” And then especially I thought of John Newton: “Christ *has* blessings to impart.” I cannot impart them; you cannot impart them. We can seek them; we can pray for them, but Christ our great and glorious High Priest, our heavenly Aaron, “Christ has blessings to impart,” many blessings, abundant blessings. Well, if your religion and mine is real, it will be this: Lord Jesus, hast Thou these blessings to impart? Then may some of these blessings be mine. “Give me a blessing.” Bless me, Lord, even me. Well, “Christ *has* blessings to impart.” “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”

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