

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 209

The Lord Bless Thee (2)
Protection – Pardon – Peace

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

The emphasis here is that these wonderful blessings had to come through the priesthood. God spoke to Moses, but He did not say to Moses, "On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel." Moses was a great man, a godly man, but he was the representative of the law. There is no blessing in Moses' law. Every blessing you and I ever know, every blessing a sinner can ever receive, comes through the everlasting priesthood of the incarnate Son of God, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. God spoke to Aaron and his sons. These wonderful blessings came through the channel of the priesthood. It was one of the great works of Israel's high priest to bless the people. This text was, if you will, the formula which God Himself devised, and what else could Israel wish for outside it? On special occasions, when the people were dismissed, and it seems especially on the great day of atonement when the high priest came forth from the most holy place, the sacrifice offered, the blood sprinkled, then he had to bless the people on the grounds of that atonement made.

"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." And then you come to the New Testament, and the whole Epistle to the Hebrews gives you such a wonderful opening up, the Person and work of our great and glorious High Priest, offering the one sacrifice for sin, entering into heaven, there for ever to intercede, but still blessing the people. It is one of the great works, not just of Israel's high priest, but our great High Priest in heaven, to bless the people on the grounds of what He has done for them.

I wonder if you noticed at the close of the reading this morning (Luke 24), "He led them out as far as to Bethany." This was the end of the life of the Lord Jesus here on earth. "He led them out as far as to Bethany, and He lifted up His hands, and blessed them." And whilst He was blessing them, He was taken up into heaven. The inference is that He still has His hands lifted up and that He is still blessing His people today.

Some have thought that when the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ on the Mount of Olives blessed His immediate disciples and was taken up to heaven, He was speaking these very words, these identical words to them: “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 what great blessings these, none greater!

I was concerned what to read for the Bible reading this evening, but felt it must be that great, high-priestly prayer of the Lord and Saviour before He suffered (John 17). Really, He prayed for His people to the end of time, that they might know all these blessings of Numbers 6, and as a great and glorious High Priest He gives these great blessings of Numbers 6.

Now, “The Lord bless thee.” Often when we speak to one another, we say, “The Lord bless you.” Sometimes we say, “The Lord be with you.” I think those are perhaps the two most commonly-used expressions: the Lord bless you, or, the Lord be with you. Someone we are leaving, or someone with some great trial before them: the Lord bless you; the Lord be with you. And it is a prayer, a desire for the Lord gracious presence. “The Lord bless you.” Well, what greater blessing can we wish anyone than the Lord’s gracious presence? If we have the Lord’s gracious presence, we have the blessing. If we have the Lord’s gracious presence, we have everything.

Well then, “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.” They are beautiful words, aren’t they? As I said this morning, they hardly need any comment on them; they are a sermon in themselves. But this evening, let me just try to speak to you about a few special things in the blessing.

It is very interesting that the first thing of all, the thing that is put before any other is this: “And keep thee.” “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” Divine keeping is a wonderful blessing. If the Lord did not keep us, then every single one of us would perish. We can no more keep ourselves than we can save ourselves. We have not got a greater need than this, this need of being kept. Well, we need to be kept in a few different ways: the work of grace being kept alive in our hearts; ourselves day by day being kept from falling, being kept from denying the Lord, bringing a reproach on His truth; and then being kept finally and eternally.

So our great need of keeping! I remember in my early days spiritually how painfully I felt it, especially after making an open profession of the Lord's name. O the great need to be kept, and the impossibility of keeping ourselves! And then in those days I heard of one and another who were quite well-known, and some ministers of the gospel, who had brought open reproach by an outward fall into sin. Now we have a carnal nature, an evil nature. We live in a wicked world. We have a tempting devil. Like Israel, we are journeying through a waste-howling wilderness. How is it possible that such a weak, helpless sinner can ever endure to the end, can ever persevere, can ever be brought safely through? It is an impossibility. It is a miracle. This is the only ground of it: "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee." O but don't we have to pray for it!

"Lord, hast Thou made me know Thy ways?

Conduct me in Thy fear;
And grant me such supplies of grace,
That I may persevere.

"Let but Thy own almighty arm
Sustain a feeble worm,
I shall escape, secure from harm
Amid the dreadful storm.

"Be Thou my all-sufficient Friend,
Till all my toils shall cease;
Guard me through life, and let my end
Be everlasting peace."

There is a lot of good divinity in good old Dr. Fawcett's little hymn.

O but to be kept! And it seems to have a special weight and poignancy in it as we come right to the end of another year. We can look back over this year and we think of the mercy and the judgment, and the ups and downs, the ins and outs, the trials, the deliverances, the temptations. O but if it is this one word: *kept*. "Who are kept by the power of God." What a mercy we are still out of a deserved hell! What a mercy we are still on praying ground! What a mercy we have not yet made shipwreck of faith! "Kept by the power of God." I remember some years ago (I do not know how many; perhaps some of you can remember the occasion), when the last day of the year, December 31st, was on the Lord's day, at the evening service that day I tried to speak on just that one word:

“Kept.” Well, there is so much in it, everything in it: “Kept.” And the wonderful thing, that the Lord is the Keeper of His people, and, “His honour is engaged to keep the meanest of His sheep.” He says, “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.” “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” Well, may we give thanks if the Lord has blessed us and if the Lord has kept us during this year. It is a wonderful thing to be kept. “Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” You have often heard of that occasion a considerable number of years ago now. It was New Street Station, Birmingham, and there were two big escalators, one going up and one going down. I am told that on one was Mr. Enos Hadley and on the other was Mr. Brooker. As they passed one another (they only had a few seconds), one called out, “How are you?” And the other called back, “Kept!” I understand there is a lot more in the story than that. The one who asked, “How are you?” and received the answer, “Kept,” that one word was made a blessing to his soul.

It is a great thing to be kept. But that is looking back. We think of the new year, the unknown way. What there will be, we do not know. Now may we pray this for one another; may we pray it for ourselves: “The Lord bless thee,” each single one. “The Lord bless thee,” in that temptation, “and keep thee.” “The Lord bless thee,” in that ill health, in hospital, “and keep thee.” “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” “The Lord bless thee,” the one who is ready to faint, who cannot go on any longer, who is weary. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” Sometimes it is a good exercise to be afraid of falling, afraid of dishonouring that worthy name by which we are called, so that it brings us to this constant prayer, as we cannot keep ourselves, that the Lord Himself will keep us. Those who are tried and tempted about making an open profession of the Lord’s name, usually Satan gets hold of them like this: Well, what if you make an open profession of God’s holy name and you go on a few years, or many years, and then the time comes and you have such a fall? Well, if those are your thoughts, “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” Because He *will* bless thee, and He *will* keep thee. There is that wonderful Scripture, thinking of tomorrow, next week, next year, the unknown way, the day of death, thinking of an open profession of the Lord’s name: He is “able to keep you” – yes, even you – “from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.”

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” So here we have protection. There is a pilgrim way. There is a conflict. Here we have protection under the shadow of the Almighty. “A sovereign Protector I have, unseen, yet for ever at hand.” Here we have divine protection. O that was a good promise to me once: “The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.” So there is a looking back, there is a looking forward, and there is a looking up in gratitude. “Yet have been upheld till now; who could hold me up but Thou?” There is a looking up in hope, in dependence, in prayer that the Lord will keep us, and keep us even to the end. Now, “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.” That is protection.

“The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.” Really, this is pardon. “The Lord ... be gracious unto thee.” May the Lord be merciful to thee. Well, as sinners we need mercy. As sinners we need grace. And if the Lord is ever going to bless us, and ever going to forgive us, and ever going to cleanse us from all our sins, there is only one reason for it, only one ground, and that is if He is gracious to us. Now our God is a gracious God. That is a most simple statement, but if it sinks right into your heart, you will go home and you will “enjoy a gospel-day, and heaven begun below.” God is a gracious God, and it is His delight to be gracious. He delights in mercy. He looks on this guilty sinner, prostrate at His feet, confessing sin. He says, “I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.”

“The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee” in revealing Christ to you, in blessing your soul, in sealing pardon and forgiveness. “Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?” “The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.” Now may we pray it one for another, and may we pray it for ourselves. Lord, make Thy face shine upon me, and be gracious unto me, even me, such a sinner as me. And then that will be a blessing. That will be to be blessed indeed.

I did notice this afternoon, looking at this word, “The Lord make His face shine upon thee,” that David in the Psalms uses this expression so often. It is one thing that he prays for continually, that the Lord will make His face shine upon him. Really, it is the very same language as that

beautiful promise: “Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings.” We want the Lord to shine upon us. O, “The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.” We want the Lord to shine in our hearts, and we want the Lord to shine upon His holy Word. We want the Lord to shine upon our pathway. “A light to shine upon the road that leads me to the Lamb.” O the dear Sun of righteousness! Perhaps you feel there is a cloud between. As in nature, so in grace. Recently there have been some days and there has not been a glimpse of the sun, just a grey sky. But no-one is foolish enough to think that the sun does not exist, the sun does not shine. It is just the cloud between. What about that word in the Book of Job: “Now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds”? Perhaps you say, I am one of them. “But the wind passeth, and cleanseth them.” The hymnwriter says, until then, “trust Him, with the cloud between.” Sometimes you will see a bow in the cloud, the token of His faithfulness and mercy, the covenant of grace. But we want the Sun of righteousness to shine. Those beams of grace, those beams of glory. “See where they shine in Jesus’ face.” We want that heavenly light. We want that heavenly warmth. We want “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness,” to shine “in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” And then shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

“The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.” This is my desire for you as a congregation. I trust it is your own desire, that you pray for it. You want the light, you want the warmth from the Sun of righteousness. “Thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth.” “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee,” especially in that way of salvation and love and mercy. The whole verse speaks of divine favour. It speaks of, to use Bunyan’s words, “grace abounding to the chief of sinners.”

“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.” There is a loving parent, but that parent is offended and there is a frown on his face, or else he hides his face. “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” That is, you want the Lord to smile upon you. You remember our old friend Mrs. Cornwell. Years ago, before she joined the church, she was in such darkness and bondage and terrible distress, and she could see no deliverance. Then it was as simple as this, but as great as

this. She said, “The Lord smiled on me.” O and her deliverance was complete in a moment. “The Lord smiled on me.” That is what it means. “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” John Berridge says, “A single smile, from Jesus given, will lift a drooping soul to heaven.” Now may that blessing be yours and mine. May we have the sweet experience of it as we pass from year to year, the Lord’s favour.

“The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Perhaps you will be able to urge a prayer something like this (it is a good prayer): “Hide not Thy face far from me ... Thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.” Well, that is looking back over the past year. That is also looking forward to the unknown way. And perhaps there is a hiding of the Lord’s face. You feel to be in darkness. “Hide not Thy face far from me ... Thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.”

“The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” O what can we wish better for one another and what can we wish better for ourselves than peace? Let me say this first of all. I understand in the Jewish way of speaking, that when they wish one another peace, they do not mean literally peace, or only peace. They mean every happiness, every joy, every blessing. The Jews today still greet one another with this blessing: *Shalom*, peace. But they do not just mean literally peace. They mean every happiness, every blessing. So, “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace,” bless thee “with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”

O but just to think of the word peace. It is a sweet word, peace, even naturally so in this war-torn, sin-afflicted world. There is not much peace anywhere. In the world, with all its ambition and pleasure and wealth, there is not much peace.

“There is a peace which passeth others by,
A peace by blood in covenant promise laid,
Which lives when other mortal peaces die,
Because ’tis sealed eternally, and paid.”

“The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” – peace of conscience, peace between your soul and God, peace between earth and heaven, peace made by the blood of Christ, because He is the Prince of Peace. “Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the

government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” He is the Prince of Peace, and dying, He made peace by the blood of His cross. And He gives this peace. He gave it when He was here upon earth. How often His greeting to His disciples was, “Peace be unto you.” He gave this peace while here on earth, and as a great, exalted High Priest, He still gives peace. “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” He says, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” And, “He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition.” “He is our peace.” “This glorious Man thy peace shall be.”

“The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” – peace with God, that peace the angels sang of over Bethlehem, peace between heaven and earth, peace of conscience. And then peace amidst all your troubles and trials and sorrows, to find a resting place in Christ, to know something of this rest which remains in Him for the people of God, to be able to leave everything in His hands, to commit everything to Him, to find that resting place in His promise. “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” You feel the stormy ocean and you feel the conflict and the rough wind, the east wind. Well, may this glorious Man who once on the Sea of Galilee said, “Peace, be still.... And there was a great calm,” may He speak to your troubled heart, and then with you likewise there will be a great calm.

Well, it is an uncertain world (isn’t it?), and many of you feel uncertainties in your own heart, in your own life. As we venture into the unknown way, “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee.” It is a smiling face. With this on my mind, I was very struck by the closing hymn this morning:

“Why art thou afraid to come?
Why afraid to tell thy case?
He will not pronounce thy doom;
Smiles are seated on His face.”

That is it. “The Lord lift up His countenance.” Lord Jesus, show Thy smiling face. “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” “The Lord bless thee” with every blessing in Christ, but these three great blessings here in particular: protection, pardon, peace. Now

what more can I wish you? What more can you seek? What more can God give? Protection, pardon, peace. “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Well, the Lord fulfil all our petitions. The Lord bless us with these three blessings embraced here. “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” – tonight, in the new year, in the hour of death, to all eternity. “And give thee peace.”

(The morning sermon on the same text was published last month.)