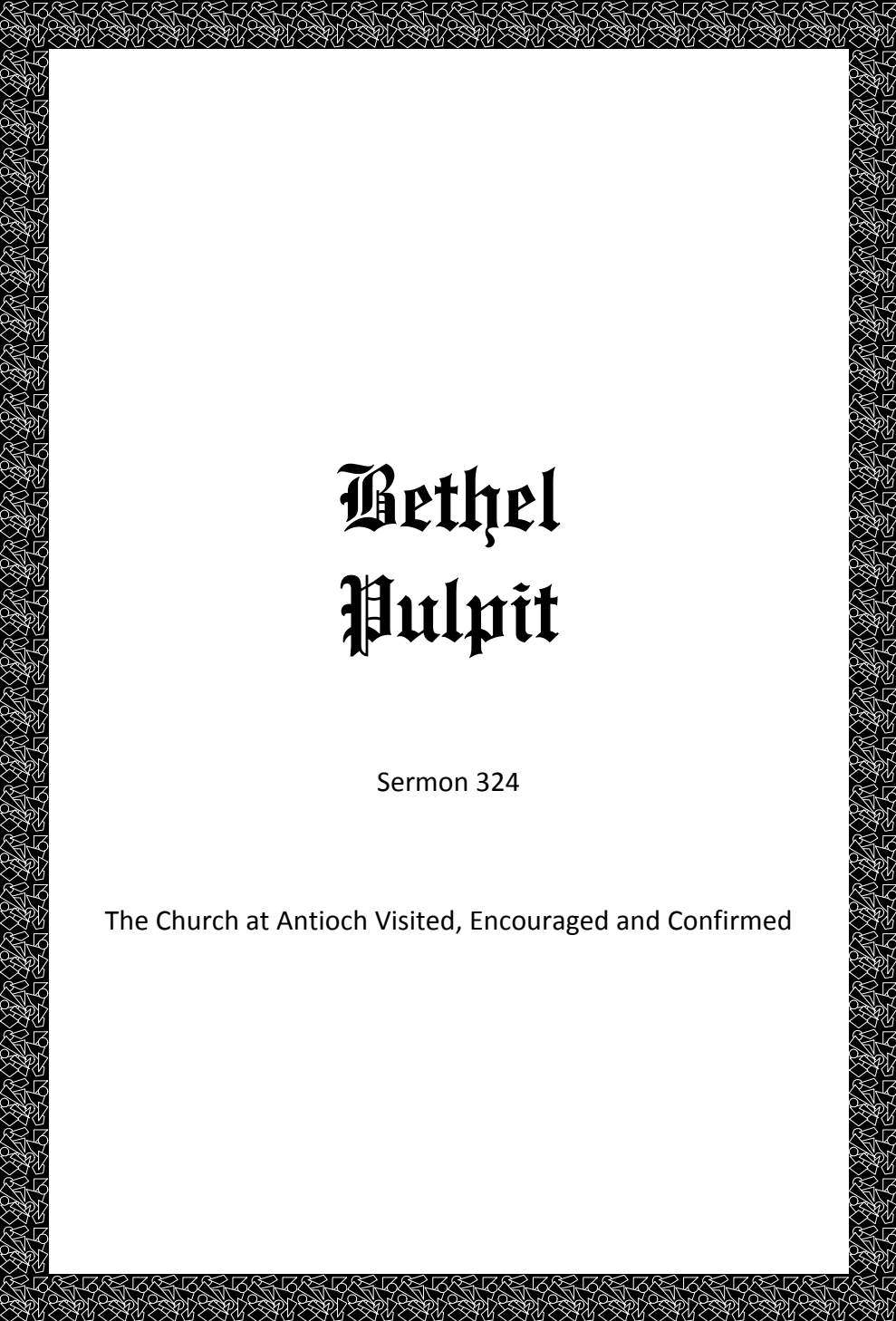




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 324

The Church at Antioch Visited, Encouraged and Confirmed

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 16th January, 2000**

Text: *"Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord" (Acts 11. 23).*

The sovereignty of God is a deep mystery, especially the way in which He brings good out of seeming evil. Now this little cluster of verses begins with a reference to the death of Stephen and "the persecution that arose about Stephen," and the scattering of the Lord's people. When godly Stephen was martyred, it seemed an irreplaceable loss to the early church, this young man so godly, so able. And why did the Lord allow it? He is taken away. There is a martyr's death. And yet you see the wonderful ability of the Lord to raise up even from Stephen's persecutor one who should be the great Apostle Paul. It is written on one of the graves in Westminster Abbey, "God buries His workmen, He carries on His work." God is not bound to any man. If He needs a man, that man will be there.

But still there was this deep sorrow, this trial, this persecution, as Luke records it here, "the persecution that arose about Stephen," and the Lord's people being scattered. It must have been a great trial to them to leave their homes and their friends. But we are told that in a most remarkable way the Lord overruled it to His honour and glory. You say, How can this be? Well, "They which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the Word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus." In other words, wherever these scattered believers went, they bore a witness to the name and Person and merits of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

This is a beautiful expression: "Preaching the Lord Jesus." We have it a few times in the Acts of the Apostles. We have it twice with Philip. "Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them." And then in the dessert of Gaza with the Ethiopian

eunuch: “Then Philip ... began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” And you have it here: “Preaching the Lord Jesus.” This is the theme of the gospel: “Determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” This is the foundation of the gospel: “Preaching the Lord Jesus.” Without it there would not be any gospel; there would not be any hope. You could just think of all these things that they preached concerning the Lord Jesus – the wonderful fulness of grace that dwells in Him; His blessed ability to save even to the uttermost; the riches of mercy that are treasured up in Him, and yet He “will by no means clear the guilty”; that those who live and die strangers to Him live and die without hope.

O this “preaching the Lord Jesus”! And it separates. It always will separate. It did then; it does now. There are those who can see no beauty in the Lord Jesus, no need of Him: “Why spend your Sundays listening to words about a Man who died on the cross?” There is no sense of need. The Word of God says there is one reason for this: the god of this world hath blinded their minds lest they should believe. But there are others, and as they hear the preaching of the Lord Jesus, they are pricked in their hearts and they feel their need as sinners, and they realise that one day they must give an account and stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and what an attraction they see in the preaching of the Lord Jesus! They say, This is what I need; this is my only hope. “Give me Christ, or else I die.” O that I might know Him!

“Preaching the Lord Jesus.” It seems that some of them were those who had been equipped and qualified by the great Head of the church Himself to be preachers of the gospel, but the implication here is that this word belonged to all of them. They were able to bear their little witness; they were able to bear their testimony. It seems those days have long since gone. Bunyan used to talk about the godly women in Bedford “gossiping the gospel.” Well, we talk about anything and everything today, but there were some of those godly old people and sometimes their conversation was made more of a blessing to the people than the sermon from the pulpit. The older ones remember that when they were young: how much blessing they received from those who after the service were speaking so graciously of the Lord’s dealings with their soul.

Well, here we have the mysterious sovereignty of God – what seemed to be a tragedy, yet the things that happened in the providence of

God “fell out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” Stephen martyred, persecution arises, the saints of God are scattered, but as they are scattered abroad, there is this preaching of the Lord Jesus. Now beloved friends, this is the secret: “And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.” Now we take those two things together: “preaching the Lord Jesus,” and “the hand of the Lord was with them.” And then this third thing flows from it. You have three things: “preaching the Lord Jesus”; “the hand of the Lord was with them”; “a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.” Now that is the secret of it all, and it would be a wonderful thing if the hand of the Lord might be made bare on our behalf, if we knew those days of the right hand of the Most High. The Lord’s word still stands: “The Lord’s hand is *not* shortened, that it cannot save.” There is a solemn word that follows: “But your iniquities have separated between you and your God.”

But, “The Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save.” May there be that real, fervent, wrestling prayer for this in our day, that as we seek to preach the Lord Jesus, to speak well of Him, to lift Him up, that the hand of the Lord might be with us; that is, blessing the Word, attending it with power, sealing it home in the heart, making it to be “in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance.” And then, and only then, will a great number believe and turn to the Lord. If you will, this is faith and repentance, believing and turning to the Lord. It is God’s Word. It is under the influence of the Spirit of God. It is as the hand of the Lord is with us.

So beloved friends, this is the background, the interesting and important background to this word I have read to you this morning, this wonderful little revival that broke out in the city of Antioch. This is Antioch in Syria. It seems there was this little revival as the Lord blessed the preaching of His Word and sinners were born again of the Spirit and fled for refuge to Jesus. This is the background to what I have read to you, and before actually coming more to what I have read, I feel how important a few comments on this remark of Luke: “And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” You see, this wonderful little revival, this blessing, these sinners turning to Christ under the power of the Holy Spirit, and they were the first people who bore this honoured name of Christians. “The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” It seems that at

first it was given as a term of scorn. O but what an honoured title it has been down the ages!

“The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” And beloved friends, when you and I come to die, when we come to the end of everything here below, there will be one thing that matters, and it is this: were you and I made real Christians? O what is it to be a real Christian, not an imitation one, not an imaginary one, not an *almost Christian*? I believe our chapels have many *almost Christians*. Paul said, “I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and *altogether* such as I am.” He says it so kindly and lovingly – “except these bonds.” O but beware of being an *almost Christian*. It is,

“Am I made a real Christian,
Washed in the Redeemer’s blood?
Have I union
To the church’s living Head?”

These “disciples were called Christians first in Antioch,” which teaches a very simple and yet clear and very important lesson, and that is this: that a real Christian is a disciple, and that a real disciple is a Christian. O to be a disciple, one who wants to learn, one who does not know everything, one who wants to be graciously taught, one who wants to sit at the Saviour’s feet; disciples, those who learn of the Lord Jesus. “Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” Now a real Christian, a real disciple, one who follows the Lord. That is what a real Christian, a real disciple is: one who follows the Lord. The Lord spoke to Matthew at the receipt of custom. He said, “Follow Me,” and it was a word of divine, almighty, effectual power. “And he left all, rose up, and followed Him.” It is to be a real Christian; it is to be a real disciple.

“In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow Thee.”

“The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” O to be one who learns of the Lord Jesus, one who sits at His feet, to be like Mary

of Bethany, realising that one thing and only one thing is needful. And then to be a follower, to follow the Lord Jesus by faith, in His goings forth from everlasting as the Son of God, and in His mysterious incarnation, and His holy life, fulfilling the law, and His sufferings, His sin-atonement death, and His burial and resurrection and ascension. Now have you ever been enabled by precious faith to follow the Lord Jesus?

“Dear Jesus, my Saviour, Thy truth I embrace –
Thy name and Thy natures, Thy Spirit and grace;
And trace the pure footsteps of Jesus, my Lord,
And glory in Him whom proud sinners abhorred.”

It is to be sweetly enabled to follow Him by faith and to rest your everlasting hope as a sinner upon Him, and then in the life of faith, sweetly constrained by love, drawn by grace, made willing in the day of divine power to be a real Christian, to be a true follower of the Lord the Lamb. For, “These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

So you see, this is the background to these verses, the mysterious sovereignty of God, the death of Stephen, the scattering abroad of the saints, the preaching of the Lord Jesus, God’s blessing attending His Word, the hand of the Lord with them, this wonderful revival. There were many of them. “A great number believed, and turned unto the Lord,” and so clear was their witness that “the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.”

“Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem.” You cannot help hearing things, can you? People talk, and sometimes people talk too much, and sometimes it would be better if they were quiet (and sometimes it would be better if they spoke). But people will talk. “Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem.” We live in a day just like that. There is hardly a day passes that tidings come to our ears about something someone has done or said, that they could have said, that they have not done. It would be a wonderful thing if tidings came to our ears like this: “Tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem,” that the name of Jesus was being sweetly proclaimed; the hand of the Lord was with them; the blessing of the Holy Spirit was made

powerfully known; sinners were being born again, turned to the Lord; God's name was being glorified. It would be a wonderful thing if once again we heard tidings like these.

“Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem.” I take it the Jerusalem church was really, if you will, the original church, the foundation church, the most influential church. And the implication here seems to be this: that when they heard tidings of these things, they were a bit suspicious; they were not altogether sure whether it was just hot air, whether it was just false fire. Anyway, they decided to send a messenger from their church that should go and investigate, and they could not have chosen anyone better than Barnabas. He bears a wonderful title in Scripture, a title that any gospel minister might well covet: “the son of consolation.”

So “they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch” to investigate. And we come to this verse I have read to you: “Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad.” He was not a suspicious man; he was a discerning man. When he saw what was happening and what had taken place and the godliness there, “he was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.” I wonder if someone came to visit us, what they would see at Bethel. I wonder if it would be this: they would see the grace of God. It is a wonderful standard. It is a wonderful witness of this church at Antioch. This man comes, this godly man, this discerning man, this stranger, and he meets with them, he sees them, he visits them, and the thing that impresses him is this: the grace of God. It is a wonderful witness. “When he came, and had seen the grace of God, [he] was glad.” I will tell you one thing. If your religion is real, grace will make you glad whenever you see it – when you see it in Christ, when you see it in the gospel, if you ever see it in your own heart, working, subduing your sin, when you see it in other people. If your religion is real, grace will make you glad, because grace is one of the great themes of Scripture. “The gospel of the grace of God.”

And when he had seen the grace of God, he was glad. What is grace? The wonderful, free, unmerited favour of God to lost, ruined, hell-deserving sinners. We see the grace of God in the eternal choice of His people. We see it in the everlasting covenant. Why, the covenant is a covenant of grace. We see it in that union between Christ and His people.

We see grace in the Saviour and His covenant undertakings as Prophet and Priest and King, to be the Surety of His people. And what grace we see in the coming of the Saviour, in His life and death and resurrection. “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.” “We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” And then the grace of the Holy Spirit, working kindly, lovingly, graciously in salvation in sinners’ hearts, showing them their need, quickening them, leading them to the Saviour. And then the gospel. O how attractive the gospel is as it speaks of salvation, “not of works, lest any man should boast,” but completely, entirely on the grounds of free grace. And that grace in the believer’s life – grace to keep, grace to uphold, grace to supply every need; that grace which reigns through Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Now when Barnabas came to this church at Antioch, that is what he saw: grace. “When he ... had seen the grace of God, [he] was glad.” It is that question I have asked you so often over the years: can you see grace? Can grace be seen? You look upon people; how can you see grace? Well, you cannot see grace in the heart, but you can see grace in the life. You cannot see grace in the root, but you can see grace in the fruit. It is that simple analogy that is used throughout Scripture – the fruit tree, whether it is a vine or an apple tree. You cannot see the root; you may not understand horticulture. Even if you could see the root, you may not know whether it is good or not. But the simplest person can understand if there are clusters of grapes on the vine or beautiful apples on the tree. Joseph Hart puts it very simply:

“When on the boughs rich fruit we see,
'Tis then we cry, ‘A goodly tree.’”

Now grace is the root of vital godliness, grace in the heart, grace implanted from above, grace the work of the Holy Spirit. You cannot see that inward, secret working of the Spirit of God – it is a secret work; it is a silent work; it is in the heart – but you can see it by the effects. Grace in the heart will always be seen as grace in the life. Well, to take a completely different example, you cannot see the wind. No one here has ever seen the wind. You have never seen the wind blowing, yet I do not think there is anyone here who would deny there is such a thing as the

wind because you have never seen it. Why? You can see the effects of it. That is it. You cannot see grace in the heart, but you can see its effects; you can see grace in the life.

“When he came, and had seen the grace of God, [he] was glad.” Well then, how is grace seen in a church, in the conduct, the life of a believer? One thing: there will be a difference, a difference from what that person once was. “Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” That is grace. You cannot see grace in the heart, but you can see that sinner turning from idols to serve the living God. You can see that separation from the world. The things that mattered once, they matter no more. The things that did not matter are the one thing needful now. And then that humility under the teaching of the Spirit, that being brought down with godly, gracious humility, that working of the fear of God in the believer’s heart and life – the way he speaks, the things he does, the places he goes, the whole of his conduct before the Lord. Doesn’t Cowper somewhere say,

“But none shall reach that holy place,
And Thy eternal glory see,
Who boast of free and sovereign grace,
Unless that grace has made them free”?

This is that gracious effect.

Let me ask you a question, beloved friends. You have known them; you have loved them, those who have been with us and died in the Lord and gone to heaven, and if you speak about them, you say, They were gracious; he was a gracious man; she was a gracious woman. Perhaps you would find it hard really to describe it, but you could see the grace of God that was in them and it made you glad. It is a solemn thing if a person makes a profession of the Lord’s name and the people of God cannot see any grace in him, and the world cannot see any grace in him, because it is not just a discerning Barnabas, but the world can recognise grace. The world does not understand the doctrine of predestination, but the world does understand a gracious life. There have been many of the Lord’s children, and people would despise their doctrine, but they could not despise their gracious, God-honouring, God-glorifying life.

“When he came, and had *seen* the grace of God, [he] was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.” Just one other thing I want to say about Barnabas. Right after this, we have rather a remarkable statement about Barnabas: “He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.” It does not say he was a good preacher; it does not say he was a clever man; it does not say he was an able debater; it does not say he was an orator; it does not say he had a good voice. It says, “He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.” He saw grace in *them*. The inspired Scriptures have spoken of the grace that was in *him*. This is a remarkable verse, and there is a lot in it, and really perhaps it does not need a comment on it, because it has sufficient comment itself: “He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.”

“Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.” That is godly discernment. He was completely satisfied with them. It seems he had not any doubt of them. But he did not say, That is alright; just go on. They were still an infant church and they still needed a word of exhortation. I can see a lot of grace in the exhortation that Barnabas gave them. People do not always speak wisely and soberly to young believers who are enjoying much of the love of Christ, but Barnabas – the grace in this exhortation he gave them, that they should “cleave unto the Lord.” I do not think as we pass into this new year, this new century, this new millennium, I do not think I can give you a better exhortation than this, that you are enabled by the Spirit of God to cling and cleave to Christ and cling and cleave to His truth, like Ruth clung and clave to His people. “Ruth clave unto her.... Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.”

“Happy souls! who cleave to Christ
By pure and living faith.”

“Nearer, nearer, to Him clinging,
Let my helpless soul be found.”

In all my weakness and helplessness and need, realising how weak and sinful I am, realising there is a pilgrimage, a profession to be walked out, and seeing this glorious Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, and seeing that

fulness of grace in Him, O to be sweetly enabled to cling and cleave to Christ, Christ that true Vine, to be like that tree planted by the waters, that spreads forth its roots by the river, and its leaf is always green, neither does it cease from yielding fruit. Or as the Lord Himself put it in John 15, clinging, cleaving to Christ, that abiding in the living Vine.

May the Lord in love and mercy bless us with His grace, much of His grace. We have that wonderful word: “He giveth more grace.” Like the story I have often told you of a minister who was asked if there was anything he wanted more than anything else. He said, “Yes; more grace.” Well, Christ has it to give. There is a wonderful fulness in Christ. May we know it more and more, and O that that grace might be seen in us! But as we venture on, as we venture forth, may we be sweetly enabled by faith to cling and to cleave to Christ, and dwell and live upon Him, upon the riches of His grace.

“Who when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.”