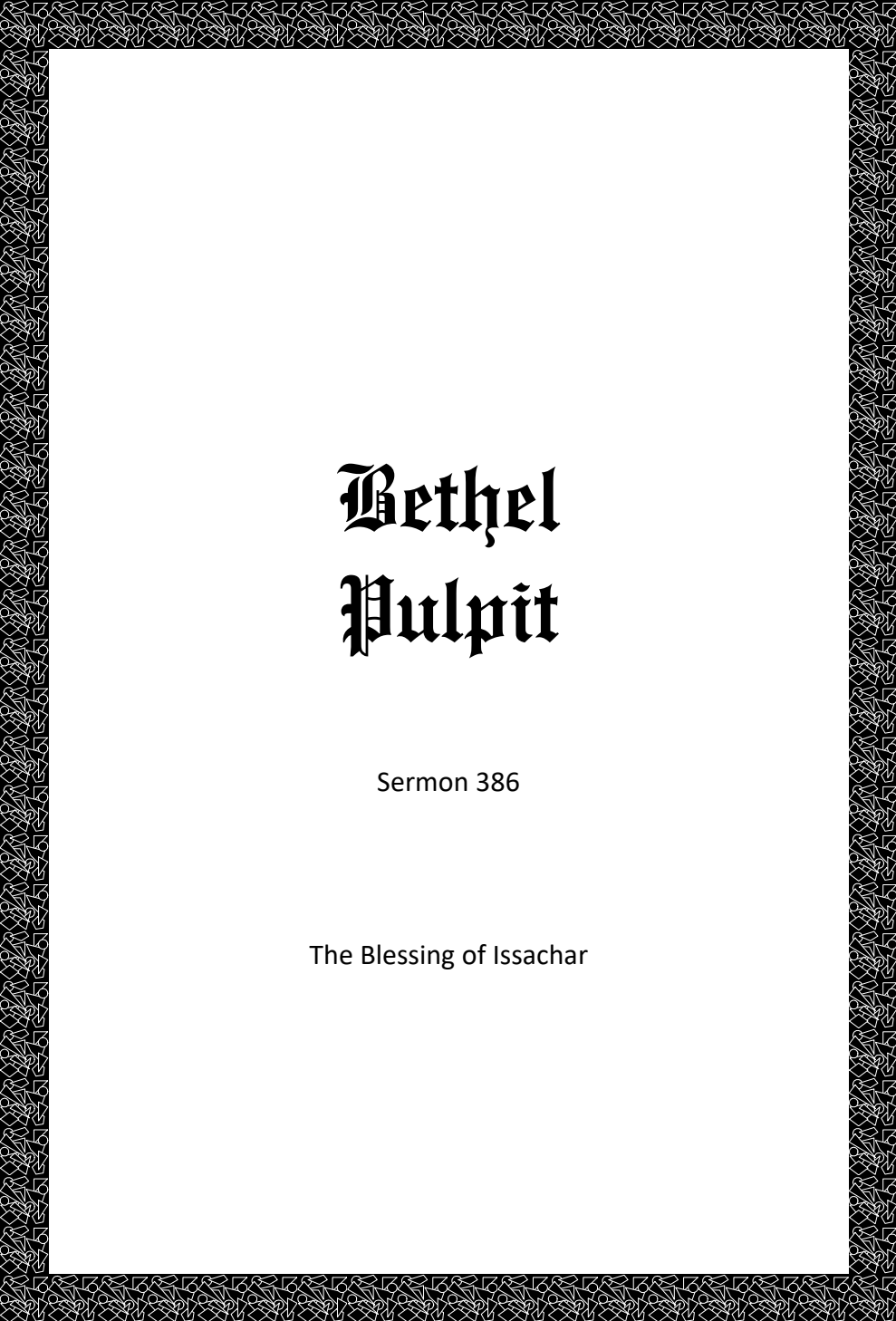




# Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 386

The Blessing of Issachar

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,  
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,  
on Lord's day evening, 3rd September, 2017**

**Text:** *“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens: and he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute” (Genesis 49. 14, 15).*

These last days of old Jacob were without doubt his best days. What trials and difficulties and sorrows he had passed through, and so much of it was his own sin, but when he comes to this chapter, he has not got a cloud in his sky. All he has to do is come to the last verse, gather up his feet into his bed, and die. It will be a wonderful mercy if your end and my end is like that – brought safely through by grace. “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!”

It seems in the midst of all this blessing of the tribes his heart is suddenly lifted above everything, as if he is no longer in the body, and he cries out, “I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord.” He had all that he wanted. No doubt his thoughts went back to Bethel and the many years in between, and the promise that God gave him. As he looked back, he could see it completely fulfilled. “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.”

In this chapter, we have the last words of old Jacob as one by one he blesses his twelve sons. We have a similar chapter with Moses, the last words of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 33. Now in these various blessings of the sons of Jacob, there are three things that we can look for. The first is that these blessings have a significance to the person concerned, individually and personally. Secondly, these are prophecies of what is going to take place in the various tribes, the twelve tribes of Israel. And thirdly, all of them, in greater or less measure have a spiritual meaning and significance for the Lord's people in all ages, the true spiritual Israel, though it has been said that with many of these blessings it is not easy at times to discern the meaning.

Now we have Issachar here, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Apart from him being head of one of the tribes, we do not know anything about

him. He does not miss the blessing here, but personally we do not know anything about him. Now we know something about Reuben; we know something about Simeon; we know something about Levi. Judah – we know about him; Joseph – we know about him, and Benjamin. But Issachar – personally we do not know anything about him at all. But the point is, he belongs to God’s Israel, and that is the important point. Beloved friends, some people are well known; some people, nothing is known about them. Some are great names; you can still read about them in books. Some have long since been forgotten. It may be like that with us: we feel to be unknown; we feel to be nobody. But that great point: if we belong to the true Israel. “Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord!” So it is this:

“In Thy fair book of life and grace,  
O may I find my name  
Recorded in some humble place,  
Beneath my Lord the Lamb.”

“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens: and he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and became a servant unto tribute.” Now the meaning of the blessing of the tribe of Issachar seems quite clear. They were going to be an agricultural people, they were going to prosper, and they were going to be strong. They were going to be satisfied; they were going to have difficulties, but they were going to be peaceful; they were going to be submissive. This very simply seems to be what the blessing of Issachar’s tribe was.

“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens.” May I make this point very clear at the beginning. There was nothing disrespectful in Jacob comparing his son Issachar to an ass. It was not a beast that was despised or a beast that was dishonoured. In the Book of the Judges, we read that the judges used to ride on asses. So there is nothing disrespectful about that. But the point is his strength. It was strength that the Lord gave him. It was strength that the Lord gave to his tribe. “Issachar is a strong ass.” He was to be labourious. There was much hard labour, but the Lord gave him strength equal to his day. This is the promise to all the true Israelites. We have it for another of the tribes, Asher: “Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.” Well, that was the same blessing as Issachar. If you are a

true Israelite, it is your blessing. “As thy days” – however many, however difficult – “as thy days, so shall thy strength be.”

“Let not thy heart despond, and say,  
‘How shall I stand the trying day?’  
He has engaged, by firm decree,  
That as thy days, thy strength shall be.”

It is not something natural; it is not just like the strength of Samson. It is spiritual strength; it comes from heaven. “Thy God hath commanded thy strength.” So in this sense, every sinner saved by grace is a true Issachar, because however weak he is by nature, he is going to be made strong.

“Strong in the strength which God supplies  
Through His beloved Son.”

We are told that that strength will be made perfect in his weakness. Now it is one thing we do need. We are brought to feel our weakness. We cannot stand. We cannot endure. We cannot continue, except that strength from above is given. But there are special times when God’s Issachars feel a need of strength, and then the Lord says, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens.” Now there are various suggestions what the two burdens were: perhaps two different tribes between which the tribe of Issachar was found; perhaps the burden of this labourious work on the land, and then the money received often having to be paid in tribute. But as it concerns us, there is a very clear point and it is this: that every sinner saved by grace has two burdens. The world only has one. The world may have bitter sorrows, agonizing sorrows, but they are all one, all natural, all in providence, all in earthly things.

But every sinner saved by grace, like Issachar, couches down between two burdens. You have your natural burdens. You have the sadnesses that come. You have things in your family. There are all these things, these burdens that day by day you have to bear. But you also have that second burden that the world is a stranger to: the burden of your sin, the burden of your soul, the burden of a never-ending eternity. Now, “Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens. “Ye may

know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.” And this is one vital difference: the world with all its sorrows has just the one burden, but the church of God couches down between two. There is providence and grace. There is natural and spiritual.

“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens.” A true, spiritual Israelite knows what to do with his burdens, both of them – natural burdens, spiritual burdens. He knows what to do with them. The Lord has told him: “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.” Now you Issachars here tonight, it may be you are pressed down with some special burden. It may be the one; it may be the other. It may be something before you in the unknown way. It may be a mountain. But whether it is a spiritual burden or whether it is a providential burden, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.”

“‘Cast,’ He said, ‘on Me thy care;  
’Tis enough that I am nigh;  
I will all thy burdens bear;  
I will all thy needs supply.’”

“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens: and he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant.” They say that the inheritance that was given to the tribe of Issachar was a magnificent inheritance for the fruitfulness of the land and for the prosperity that was there, and Issachar knew it, and Issachar was thankful for it, and Issachar was satisfied with it. The Lord appointed the different inheritances of all the tribes, and Issachar had a good one, and he was thankful for it.

“He saw ... the land that it was pleasant.” Now you have an inheritance, a life that the Lord has appointed for you, and I have an inheritance, that life appointed for me. It is a mercy if we are satisfied with it, especially when we think of the blessings of the gospel, or if we think of that “inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.”

“He saw ... the land that it was pleasant.” In the things of God, in the gospel, here at Bethel, don’t we have to be thankful for it at times! We see that the land is pleasant. Aren’t there those times – you look back over your little lives, and as you look back, you see that the land is pleasant? Even when there are difficulties, as we follow on, there is not rebellion.

There is that humble submission to the Lord. “The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places.” That is a lovely word in our hymnbook:

“Thou givest me the lot  
Of those that fear Thy name;  
If endless life be their reward,  
I shall possess the same.”

We see that the land is pleasant. O to be a true Issachar in this!

“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens: and he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant.” He had a fruitful inheritance. It was a very fruitful land, and we should be thankful if we have it – in natural things, above all in spiritual things – and we should labour for it. It is very clear that this strong ass, the whole point of it: it was labouring for the blessing. It was labouring for the fruitfulness. It was not left in laziness, in indolence. He could come into that word: “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.” O to be blessed with that real, spiritual concern for fruitfulness in the church of God, in our homes and lives and families, and in our own hearts personally! You know that word: “In all labour there is profit: but the talk of the lips tendeth only to penury.” Then we have the true prosperity of those who sow in tears and reap in joy.

“And he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant.” He was satisfied with it. He was thankful for it. Do you ever have to give thanks for the gospel? Do you ever count it the glorious gospel of the grace of God? Do you ever look at the blessings that are bestowed on sinners in Christ? Do you see them as a goodly land? Do you realise your unworthiness of them through sin, and yet do you have to bless the Lord for “the exceeding riches of His grace?” O to see the land, that it is pleasant!

“And he saw that rest was good.” I take it naturally it was such hard work, there was so much hard labour, in a sense at times not much peace. He was not called to laziness; he was not called to indolence. And so naturally, “He saw that rest was good.” Those of you who have your troubles and trials – some inward, some outward, some concerning illness and affliction, some concerning those you love, some thinking of

tomorrow, some thinking of the unknown way; then thinking of your spiritual trials – well, don't you see that rest is good, and don't you long for it! Well, in the things which are so hard for you at present, to find a resting place in Christ. Now you see that rest is good.

But then especially spiritually. When a sinner is awakened into newness of life, and when he is personally made a true, spiritual Israelite, he is “seeking rest, but finding none.” He cannot find a resting place in himself, or what he has done, or what he can do or may do. When you are seeking rest as a sinner, you cannot find rest, but you never will find rest until you find a resting place. But one thing is this: in your desires and in your prayers, you see that rest is good, and isn't that sweet when you hear a whisper saying, “Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”?

“O that I now the rest might know,  
Believe and enter in!”

“There remaineth therefore” – in Christ – “a rest to the people of God.”

“He saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant.” I understand the Septuagint version of the Old Testament gives this verse something like this: he saw *what* was good and longed for that which is good. Well, I trust we know something of that also: to see what is good – and there are many good things in the Word of God, many good things in the gospel – and that longing, that desire for things which are good. Well, a good Lord and Saviour Himself – do you long for that? “The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that trust in Him.” Or do you long for this: a good hope through grace? “Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus.”

“He saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and bowed his shoulder to bear.” Every true, spiritual Israelite will have many things to bear, and Issachar with all his prosperity had these things he had to bear. Now he did not rebel against it. He did not fight against his lot. He “bowed his shoulder to bear.” Now you may have something in your life at present. It is troubling you; it is worrying you; it is harassing you. Perhaps there is a spirit within you, you wish you did not have it; you wish

it had never come. May we know more of that loving spirit of submission. We often sing it rather glibly, but it is a solemn word:

“Lord, I would indeed submit;  
Gladly yield my all to Thee.”

“He ... bowed his shoulder to bear.” I think he knew there was another shoulder. We read of that glorious Person, the Child born, the Son given – “And the government shall be upon His shoulder.” Sometimes our shoulders are too weak to bear even what we would bow to, but those almighty shoulders that bear up heaven and earth – if only your care, your concerns, your every burden might be there, that strong Saviour, that almighty Saviour, and His shoulder bearing the great weight of your burden.

“He ... bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute.” It appears for various reasons that the claim came upon him at various times. There was something he had to pay. Perhaps it was heavy, and perhaps it was unexpected, and perhaps it was unjust, but what did Issachar do? “He ... bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute.” Sometimes a child of God can say, Well, if this is the will of the Lord, give me grace to bear it – but more than to bear it – give me grace to accept it; give me grace to acquiesce in it.

Well then, what a word this is: these twelve tribes, the true Israel, and their character, the different characters of this chapter. One will be an Asher: “His bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties.” One is a Gad: “A troop shall overcome him: but he shall overcome at the last.” One is a Naphtali: “A hind let loose: he giveth goodly words.” And of course, there are more magnificent passages concerning Joseph. And then Judah: “Unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” And then we come to little-known, unknown Issachar, and this blessed word, spoken by Almighty God about him through old Jacob. “Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens: and he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute.” What a mercy to be a true, spiritual Israelite!

Now that is not the end! Issachar is mentioned in the Book of the Revelation, the sealing of the twelve tribes. The wind could not blow upon them; they could not be harmed, they could not be touched, until all

the twelve tribes had been sealed. You go through them one by one. Yes, you know the different names. And then you come to unknown Issachar. He is not forgotten; he is not left out (Rev. 7. 7). You find that the tribe of Issachar was sealed – sealed by Almighty God. Really, in a word it is this: “O Israel” – and it is all Israel, despite all their sins, failures, faults – “O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me.” “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before Me” – not forgotten; graciously remembered. Revelation chapter 7, after all these years, and there Issachar is mentioned once more. God Himself has put His seal upon him.

“Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens: and he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute.”