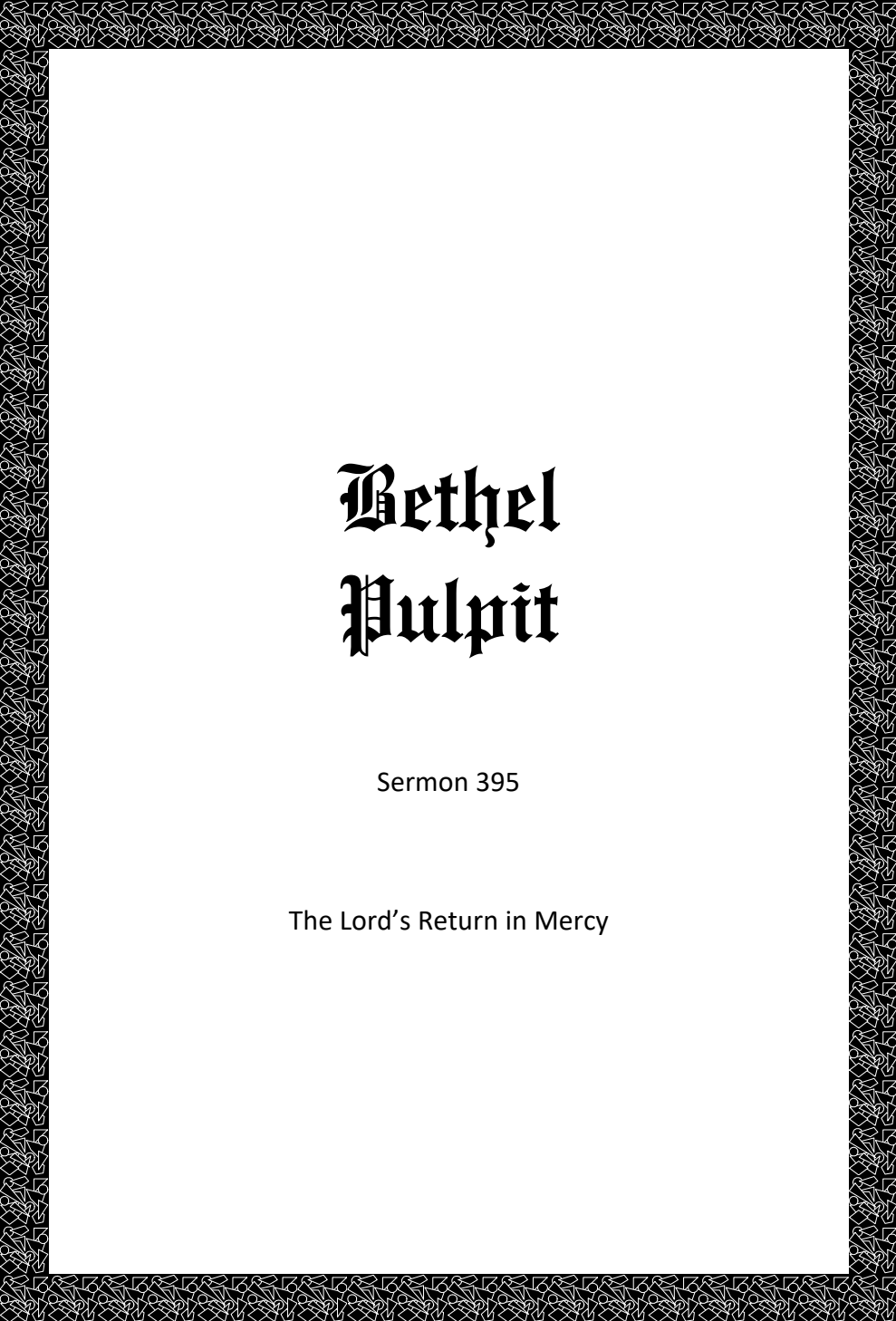




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 395

The Lord's Return in Mercy

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 18th February, 2018**

Text: *"Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem" (Zechariah 1. 16).*

There is an important background to this Book and to this chapter and to this verse. Really, we need to understand what lies behind it all, otherwise we can never really understand some of the symbolism that we have here. God's ancient people, according to God's promise, after being for seventy years captives in Babylon, had now been permitted to return to Jerusalem. They found that the temple was completely demolished, completely destroyed, that glorious temple which by God's instruction Solomon had built. Their immediate desire with the help of God was that it should be built once again.

Let me just linger here. Why is there so much about the importance of the temple? Why is so much of the Book of Ezra about the rebuilding of it? Why did Jonah in his dreadful distress say, "I will look again toward Thy holy temple"? Why did Daniel three times a day open his windows towards Jerusalem where the temple was? Well, of course, that was an outward dispensation. They had not got the whole light and liberty of the gospel. But the temple meant so much to them. It was the centre of their worship. Really, it was the gospel to them. Really, it all pointed to the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. There was a high priest there. There was a sacrifice there. There was precious blood there. There was intercession there.

So this remnant had returned from Babylon, and with that desire, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest, to rebuild the temple. Now it started well, and then everything seemed to go wrong. So at the time when this first chapter in the Book of Zechariah was written, for sixteen years not a single stone had been laid in building the temple. There were really two reasons. One was that they had most dreadful opposition from the enemies of God's people. But the other: a spirit of awful lethargy and indifference and self-seeking came upon them. I am sure, beloved friends, you can see the parallel to many of these things in our day.

Now the Lord raised up two prophets. One was Haggai, and the other was Zechariah. Haggai's preaching tended to be very simple and very blunt. Really, he told them they were sinful, they were wrong, that they just had to start building the temple again, and they did, under the blessing of God. Zechariah united with him, telling the people the same things. But Zechariah's ministry was so different, for there were these wonderful visions he had in which the Lord personally spoke to him and revealed what he had to do, what Israel had to do. But also there is so much in Zechariah which points forward to gospel days. When you come almost to the end, you read of "a fountain opened ... for sin and for uncleanness." You read of a promise: "They shall look upon Me whom they have pierced." The apostle tells us clearly that that word was fulfilled in the death of the Saviour at Calvary.

So here we have the background, and we are told that the people prospered through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. Now here the prophet had a remarkable vision, in some ways the kind of vision that the Apostle John had on the Isle of Patmos. It was night time, and he saw a Man riding on a red horse, and it is made abundantly clear that this was our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Man riding on a red horse, standing in the midst of the myrtle trees which were in the bottom, that is, down in the valley.

So it was a day of small things. It was a day of darkness. It was a revelation of where God's ancient people were at this moment. But there was this blessed assurance that their God had not forsaken them, their Lord had not forgotten them, but there He was riding in the midst of them. These minor prophets have a beautiful message for us in this solemn, latter day, when we think of the church – a dark day, and in the bottom, but this glorious Man riding in the midst, in all His glory, in all His authority.

"I saw by night, and behold a Man riding upon a red horse, and He stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom." Next, the prophet saw that with Him there were other horses. We are told what kind of horses they were. Some were red, some were speckled, or bay horses, and some were white. And the prophet asked what they meant. Now there was another angel – not the Son of God, but a created angel – and he gave the answer: that these were going up and down all over the earth to see what was happening there and to bring back an answer. If you want to

read the godly commentators, they will all tell you what these different kinds of horses were, and they will all tell you different things. The only thing I am going to say is this:

“Creatures of every sort and kind
Are all at His control;
The God that fills immensity
Must reign from pole to pole.”

The Lord has His agents everywhere. He can send them forth. They obey Him.

They come back and they have a strange message: “We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest.” Now in Jerusalem it was just the opposite. It was not rest; it was sadness; and yet the rest of the earth, everything seemed to be happy and peaceful. And this glorious Man who stands among the myrtle trees began to pray, and He began to intercede on behalf of the Lord’s poor, afflicted, despised people. It is a glorious truth, the intercession of our Lord Jesus, fully revealed in the New Testament. “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” “This Man, because He continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.”

His intercessory prayer was this: “O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which Thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years?” – these seventy years of the captivity. Well, what follows is just what you would expect. Sometimes our poor prayers trouble us. Sometimes we wonder if they go higher than the roof, but not the intercessory prayers of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, here revealed as this Man standing among the myrtle trees.

The Lord answered Him. His Father in heaven answered Him. How did He answer Him? “With good words and comfortable words.” That is what we would like to hear, isn’t it! They were in a sad state. They were distressed. They were in trouble. Things were not going as they wished. “Good words and comfortable words.” Let us be clear, beloved friends. You know as well as I do that some words are really good

words, but they are not comfortable words to us, and then we know sometimes naturally we hear some comfortable things, but they are certainly not good. When the Lord speaks comfortable words, they are good words.

Now what follows? “Cry thou.” That does not mean shout. It means to speak with authority, like the king’s herald. “Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy.” Jealousy is really a strange combination of extreme love and extreme hatred. Now with the Lord here, it was great love to His people, but it was a solemn hatred against those who had been oppressing them. Then the Lord tells us that though this little remnant of His godly people were troubled, distressed, discouraged – things were not going right, the work was not continuing, it seems everything was failing, and they had all these mighty enemies against them – the Lord was going to deal with their enemies. They were in His hand. It was His purpose that His temple should be built. The Lord had a love to that temple.

You know what Haggai said about it. Haggai’s prophecy only seemed to last a month or two, but before he finished, he could see the temple going to completion. He said, “The Desire of all nations shall come.... The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former.” Well, there never was a more magnificent building than Solomon’s temple. If you read the description of it, it was magnificent – the gold and the silver, the best wood, the precious stones. This little temple now seemed as nothing in comparison. “The Desire of all nations shall come.... The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts.” The second temple was to be glorified when our Lord and Saviour was here on earth and He used to walk in that temple and preach in that temple. What a point there is here. It is not outward things. It is not outward glory. It is the Lord’s presence. It is, Jehovah-shammah – “The Lord is there.”

This brings us to our text: “Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies.” It seemed as if the Lord had forsaken them. The godly remnant felt that the Lord had forsaken them, but He had not, and now He clearly tells them, openly, graciously, gloriously, He is returned amongst them. They have His gracious presence. They had what

the old writers called *Immanuel blessings*” – “God with us.” They were going to be blessed. The temple was going to be built.

“I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies.” Now that is the only way in which our God and Saviour ever returns to poor, unworthy, undeserving sinners, then or now. If you are praying for the Lord to return to you, it must be in mercy. We do not deserve it. Israel did not deserve it then. The Lord said, “I am returned,” but be clear on the ground. It is on the ground of mercy alone. And He puts it in the plural: “mercies,” which as I understand it, in the Hebrew tongue in the Old Testament means the abounding of His mercy. Now what a view we have here, and how many sermons could be preached on it – the abounding of God’s mercy from everlasting in His covenant purposes, in the sending of His dear Son, in the plan of salvation, in the Saviour coming, in all that He did, in all that He accomplished, in His death on the cross, in His resurrection, ascension and glorification, in the way He deals with sinners now. We are told, “He delighteth in mercy,” and if your religion and mine is real, we too will delight in God’s mercy made known in the Lord Jesus, especially made known at Calvary, where the Lord Jesus was crucified.

“Here on the cross ’tis fairest drawn,
In precious blood and crimson lines.”

There are some of you here and you love to speak of the immensity of God’s mercy.

“Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house” – that is the temple – “My house shall be built in it.” Now nothing can stand before God’s *shalls* and *wills*. The little remnant feared it never would be built. When you come to chapter 4, Zerubbabel – he was the prince of the house of Judah; he was the leader of the people – it was like a great mountain before him, a terrible mountain. The house never could be built. He feared it, but Satan suggested it and all their enemies mocked at them and said the house would never be built. In chapter 4 you see poor, dejected, discouraged Zerubbabel, and the Lord speaks: “Who art thou, O great mountain?” Zerubbabel could have given a good answer. It was a terrible mountain. “Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the headstone” – that is the completion of the temple – “he shall

bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it.”

We just linger here for a moment. I am sure many of you have your mountains – your sins, your soul and eternity. Perhaps your prayers do not seem to be answered. Perhaps you are dark in your spirit. In providence you have so many things – sickness, in your family, your children, old people. We could go on. “Who art thou, O great mountain?” It is not just a question; it is a challenge, as if the Lord said, It does not matter how great the mountain is. Before Zerubbabel it is going to be made a plain. O the Lord’s gracious ability to make mountains into plains!

“Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts.” That is the authority. They had everything against them, but they had God on their side. It was a great God, an almighty God. He is the One who speaks, and He is the One who will have the last word, and He is the One whose word shall stand. “My house.” Well, poor Zerubbabel, Joshua, they thought it was *their* house and their poor endeavours. The Lord says, It is *My* house.

“My house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem.” I suppose literally they were going to see a man with a measuring line which was being used in the building. They could see him going forth in Jerusalem, and what did it mean to them? Well, it meant that God’s work was going on. It is just like perhaps if you need some work to be done at your house, and somebody calls one day. You hope it is the man who is going to do the work, but it is not, and perhaps somebody else calls, and still you wait. Then one day a van draws up and you can see when the man get out, he has the tools with him, and he has come to do that job you are waiting for. That is just what this word means here: “A line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem.”

Well then, this was many years ago. What does it mean for us today? I will just make a three-fold application. First of all, *our sinful country*. How it is like ancient Jerusalem, which was once the fairest of cities, and it was the place where God’s name was glorified, but now you see the city in ruins, the temple down. Isn’t this a picture of England at present! Now is there any hope? Well, the vital thing, the only ground of

our hope is mercy – God’s mercy, sovereign mercy, almighty mercy, mercy in Jesus. May that be the ground of our prayer, that the Lord may return again to our country in mercy, and there make the place of His feet glorious, and there change things completely. It was as if things were going to be turned completely upside down, and that is just what we need, for the Lord to return to us in mercy. Now may there be the prayer for it at our prayer meetings, and in secret, and may this Angel of the covenant intercede for us. May we hear Him say how angry He is with all those who are dishonouring His name and doing all these things against His people.

Now the second application: *to the church of God today*. Well, passing by the state of our national church, coming to our own congregations, isn’t it like that dark night, and the myrtle trees, and down in the bottom of the valley! Now may we by faith see this: that the Lord has not left us completely, that He is still standing there, in the midst of the myrtle trees, and He is not inactive, and still,

“Creatures of every sort and kind
Are all at His control.”

But with our churches in their low estate, what can we plead but mercy? – God’s mercy in His faithfulness, God’s mercy in His promises, God’s mercy to raise up faithful men to preach the everlasting gospel of the grace of God, God’s mercy by the Spirit to work in sinners’ hearts, and then to see the work going on. “My house shall be built.” “Do good in Thy good pleasure unto Zion: build Thou the walls of Jerusalem.” We often hear that expression: the desolations of Zion. Well, that is exactly what it was at the beginning of Zechariah chapter 1: the desolations of Zion. But if you read through the Book of Ezra, by the time you come to chapter 6, everything is different. The work is going on. May we pray for it; may we see it.

“What though the gates of hell withstood?
Yet must this building rise;
'Tis Thy own work almighty God,
And wondrous in our eyes.”

As we think of our congregations, we think of ourselves here at Bethel, that the Lord might still come to us in the riches of His mercy, and we

might still see the house being built, and built up of these living stones, built on that sure foundation. “Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation”; “and he that believeth on Him shall not be confounded.”

But then especially, *to come to it personally*. We want the Lord to return. Does it grieve you when the Lord is absent? I know that with His dear people, He never really departs from them. He has said, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” But feelingly there are those days of darkness, those days when you do not feel the Lord’s presence, when you think it is a long time since He blessed you, a long time since you had that deliverance. Surely there are some of you here and you are not really satisfied with how you feel – in your homes, when you come to chapel, when you try to pray, when you try to deal with things in your family, when you seek to meditate on your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is this: that the Lord will return. You know this: it must be mercy. It is like that prayer of Cowper’s, though addressed to the Holy Spirit:

“Return, O holy Dove! return,
Sweet Messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn,
And drove Thee from my breast.”

O return unto Jerusalem, return unto my soul, in mercy. Enable me to return to Thee in repentance and faith and humility and love.

O but to see that it must be all on the ground of God’s mercy. And we do not just think of mercy in the abstract, but we think of mercy in the Person and finished work of our Lord Jesus. That is where mercy abides. That is where mercy abounds. That is where mercy is displayed. That is where mercy shines in the face of Jesus Christ. There in all its fulness we see it in the wounds of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the bleeding sacrifice, and you see mercy flowing there like a river to the chief of sinners. Here is our plea: mercy through blood – that longing that the Lord might return, that returning He might bless us, that returning He might be everything to us.

“Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house shall be built” – personally.

“The work begun is carried on,
Nor hell can it deface;
The whole elect with Christ are one
And must be saved by grace.”

“My house shall be built.” “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” – still all on the ground of mercy. And then you see the tokens of it, and they are tokens of mercy, to see that line stretched out over Jerusalem.

May the Lord command His blessing upon His Word.

* * *

Thy mercy, my God, is the theme of my song,
The joy of my heart, and the boast of my tongue;
Thy free grace alone, from the first to the last,
Has won my affections, and bound my soul fast.

Thy mercy, in Jesus, exempts me from hell;
Its glories I'll sing, and its wonders I'll tell;
'Twas Jesus, my Friend, when He hung on the tree,
Who opened the channel of mercy for me.

Without Thy sweet mercy I could not live here;
Sin soon would reduce me to utter despair;
But, through Thy free goodness, my spirits revive,
And He that first made me still keeps me alive.

Thy mercy is more than a match for my heart,
Which wonders to feel its own hardness depart;
Dissolved by Thy goodness, I fall to the ground,
And weep to the praise of the mercy I found.

The door of Thy mercy stands open all day,
To the poor and the needy, who knock by the way.
No sinner shall ever be empty sent back,
Who comes seeking mercy for Jesus's sake.

Great Father of mercies, Thy goodness I own,
And the covenant love of Thy crucified Son;

All praise to the Spirit, whose whisper divine
Seals mercy, and pardon, and righteousness mine.

J. Stocker